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## The chosen questions of the downtown cultural space revitalisation in the context of increasing Polish cities attractiveness

**Abstract:** Cultural space revitalisation is a specific kind of city centre renewal. It especially aims at improving a degraded urban structure in the aspect of spatial and social attractiveness. In the paper, the author deals with questions of directing a city centre revitalisation process in the right way. In author's opinion it is needed to prove the necessity of the search for solutions to the current spatial problems within a city centre simultaneously considering some extra questions. Having reached the proper level of social and economic stabilization, other kinds of problems will be addressed subsequently. Therefore, it is necessary to think about the future right now, and programme long-term and interdisciplinary strategies for the city downtown development. In conclusion, it is essential to provide the right spatial politics to stimulate the realization of a compact city idea.

**Key words:** public space, cultural space, city centre revitalisation, integrated system of public space, downtown attractiveness

### Introduction

The downtown area is an overriding and focal point of the city spatial structure and is characterized by the highest degree of the prestigious functions accumulation. The downtown, by virtue of its construction, is under permanent transformation and become an area of conflicts between the functional capabilities of the old tissue and the localization requirements of modern features. There are a lot of various factors which reduce the attractiveness of the center including: limited accessibility, parking zones of too small absorption, a low technical standard of buildings, the lack of greenery and spatial chaos. They must be eliminated so as to provide the proper standard and quality of the downtown area. The cultural offer and facilities associated with the public space are fundamentally different from the other downtown functions. To a large extent they depend on the spontaneity of the city residents and users, the amount of their leisure time, econom-

ic opportunities, needs, preferences and aspirations. From the anthropological point of view, each area shaped by the man is an expression of the culture, because it reflects the technical level and structure of a society. The cultural space in the public consciousness is associated with the artistic and historical values, but also entertainment, fun and relaxation. The revitalisation process of the downtown area basis on the integrated system of public space (focal points and links), composed of interdependent elements, should provide the proper level of the social attractiveness and competitiveness of the entire city.

The downtown revitalisation process cannot proceed at random and in unplanned way. As a long-term and multi-faceted process should take into account several stages of adopted solutions and the relatively long time horizon. Only such an integrated approach can bring positive and desired results. The revitalisation means the recovery, regeneration and bringing back to life of the devastated area. It should be stressed that the revitalisation cannot be misunderstood in the meaning of repairing or modernization of the separate buildings or the elements of infrastructure. Equally important is to develop the support programs for the local economy and to find the real solutions to the social and economic problems which are the most serious barriers in the revitalisation process. The revitalisation cannot therefore be viewed only in terms of planning, urban design and architecture. The idea of sustainable development and re-development, so important in the context of the revitalisation process, is to find harmony between the different and contradictory factors. The social aspect of sustainable development means appropriate shaping of the social environment in the neighborhood meaning the anti-social exclusion solutions. The economic aspect involves the prevention of unemployment and organization of the new jobs. The cultural aspect of revitalisation is largely a question of preservation of the environment and non-material culture and identity of the place. The reasonable management of the vacant land inside the city, related to the implementation of the compact city idea, is necessary for the sustainable and harmonious development of the city. This is particularly relevant in terms of the changes that occur inside the inner structures and which are expressed, inter alia, in the process of industry displacement of the center and intensive residential investing. The free land remaining in the downtown area often become victims of the speculative politics of their owners and thereby block the development of the degraded but valuable areas. The city should strive at all costs to "run" open spaces within the downtown area, opening them for the further development. There are a lot of tools that can be useful to start the process of the downtown area revitalisation e.g. the redemption or the exchange of land through the public-private partnership and the co-financing investments supported by the European Union.

## **The chosen aspects of Polish city centres' revitalisation**

The revitalisation process touches upon a number of various problems. In Poland, the actions leading towards the improvement of the infrastructure, com-

munication and social context of city users are still the most pressing. But it is worth stressing that one needs to think also about other aspects so as to plan the long-term solutions. The contemporary Polish city centre needs up-to-date functional and spatial equipment just like the attractive offer of the commerce and service sectors. It is essential for its proper development, which is the synonym of the continuous adaptation of the life conditions to the changing needs and the new expectations of city users. It is the author's opinion, that one must search for solutions to the current problems but simultaneously take into consideration some extra questions. Having reached the proper level of social and economic stabilization, one will be obliged to cope with other kinds of problems. Therefore, it is necessary to think about the future right now and programme long-term and interdisciplinary strategies for the city downtown development.

The questions posited in the paper seem to be up-to-date for city revitalisation and still remain a current topic of the professionals' discussion in Poland. There are many Polish cities which are still unprepared to introduce the comprehensive actions, treating revitalisation as an interdisciplinary and long-term process. One witnesses political, social and spatial changes that have a great – positive or negative – impact on the shape of the Polish city.

The downtowns are losing their significance and are becoming less competitive in comparison with the suburbs. This decline in attractiveness finds expression in a fairly small interest of the potential investors in starting up their business in the downtown area and of the city inhabitants as well. It is observed that citizens tend to move to the suburbs to live there in a more comfortable manner. The authentic values seem not to be so attractive in the contemporary city, which is obviously connected with the rather low standard and comfort of living in the downtown area.

## **Downtown renewal through culture in Western European cities – chosen aspects**

The presented work focuses on the issues that are recognized to be a very important in the renewal processes in Western Europe. The proper use of the existing and potential values not only improves the quality of life, but also contributes to marketing success (Docherty 2001: 2225–2250). The realization of the needs and aspirations of the local community and socio-economic recovery translates into an overall rise. The cultural potential is a challenge primarily for the creative and enterprising people that tend to locate their business within the city centre (Hall 2000: 639–649). The processes of the city centre revitalisation differ from the ones in other parts of the city because of the historic values and cultural potential that is to be developed with the respect to valuable spatial surrounding (Nawma et al. 2003: 310–322). Many foreign examples of the revitalisation and renewal of urban centers can provide not only the real effectiveness of revitalisation, but also provide an excellent model to follow in Polish conditions. The good example that

we can observe is the city centres revitalisation in the United Kingdom (Lewis, Graham 1992: 11).

Nowadays in the United Kingdom term 'regeneration' is widely used. It is understood as revitalisation in functional, social and economic point of view. In the context of planning city space regeneration it is extremely important to understand the needs of the place, its strenghts and weaknesses, the economic potential as well as preferences and problems of the local society. The attention must be paid to plan the separate stages of the regeneration process through the examination of the possibilities of the new functions introduction, costs estimation, balance of the opportunities and threats and level of the probable social acceptance. The inhabitants should take active part in the regeneration process because it is the only way to solve really important problems properly. In addition, it helps to develop a sense of participation and minimizes the effects of the opposition, which can effectively destroy the initiatives within the regeneration process. The positive social assessment of the project is one of the key indicators of the regeneration program success. In the UK, the multi-agency cooperation is widely used and very popular. Thanks to it, the public sector does not ignore local priorities. Another positive aspect is that often after completion of the regeneration, the private companies do not stop supporting the regenerated area. These companies are set up to distribute government funds through the cooperation with the local authorities, landowners, communities and developers. The biggest impact on the success of the entire project have the following elements: organization of development, funding, planning, marketing and project management (Colantonio, Dixon 2011:8).

## **Revitalisation of a downtown cultural space**

In the paper, a main attention is focused on a specific form of a city centre renewal, namely downtown cultural space revitalisation. It is understood as a particular kind of downtown public space, characterised by the presence of both historical and contemporary cultural values, or the existing or potential cultural functions. The author uses the term 'cultural space' quoting the Polish urban planning mentor (Evans 2003: 221) who claims that a cultural value refers not only to a separate building but also to its surrounding that creates the real atmosphere of the place.

Assuming that the cultural values have a great impact on the level of downtown attractiveness, a downtown area which remains under the influence of the existing or potential cultural function can act an extremely important role in a revitalisation process of an entire downtown area or even a whole city. At the same time, the existing values help to create a proper city image and build up a city identity. If it is possible to demarcate cultural spaces within the downtown areas, it is highly possible that the downtown quality and attractiveness can be reinforced by development of an existing cultural potential. That way of directing a spatial aspect of a revitalisation and cultural orientation of separate undertakings within this process help to highlight existing values, control introduction

of the new investments and give the spatial reshaping the right direction. At the same time it contributes to increase the level of downtown attractiveness as well as the social activity and participation in the revitalisation process.

According to the author, it is a right way of spatial revitalisation within a downtown area, if the following conditions can be carried out within an examined city: it is possible to demarcate the downtown area, there are existing historical values or cultural functions, there is a spatial potential to be developed and there is a need of increasing downtown area attractiveness.

The proposed in the paper solution is a suggestion that was built up as a result of observation of the Western European countries revitalisation and review of the professional literature. It is also important to accentuate a need to widen the social participation in the revitalisation process that will surely serve to increase the attractiveness and quality of life in the downtown area. In many Polish cities one can also observe a very complicated ownership situation – the huge parts of downtown areas are in private hands. Furthermore, the local authorities have no financial resources and no legal right to help private investors in modernization of the buildings which in fact play crucial role in the public space. These aspects can act as obstacles in the process of revitalisation a cultural values. The situation is a little bit complicated and difficult to be solved at once. It is also the result of communism system when a lot of owners were deprived of their properties and that is why now there is a constitutional provision that private property is overriding. That was really needed in Polish current conditions but on the other hand this situation is the source of many spatial conflicts and problems uneasy to solve at once. There is also lack of the proper legal mechanisms helping to direct correctly revitalisation process. There is no law according to the revitalisation, there is even no definition of revitalisation that is legally recognized. Revitalisation is not considered in law as a part of urban planning and there is no legal right to treat revitalisation as a separate process with its own rules. The role of revitalisation in the planning system is still being transformed in Poland but yet not finally formed.

## **Conclusion**

A lot of researchers claim that cultural values and functions are extremely important parameters in urban strategies creating and remain the significant elements of the identity and uniqueness of the place preservation. The only proper way of the city centre revitalisation is a multifunctional offer of retail business and cultural functions that answer up-to-date needs and preferences of the local society. It is needed to introduce new methods of financing revitalisation that are not widely used in Poland, based on the public-private partnership solutions. The culture is very important to combine in the spatial and social levels the past and the future of the city. It is to pay homage to the history and to open the city for new preferences and needs of contemporary citizens. As quality of life grows in the rankings of city attractiveness, it is likely that culture will become a more

enduring element in city management interventions as a manifestation of a community's sense of belonging, identity and, ultimately, happiness and satisfaction expressed through their direct voluntary engagement with local place making projects (Schneekloth, Shibley 1995: 1–18).

The culture plays very important role in the revitalisation process especially in the downtown areas. The role of arts and creative cultural industries has been increasing gradually since 1950s worldwide. Historically, arts and culture have not been linked directly to economic development strategies in urban areas. Nowadays, culture is still perceived to be a real vehicle for social integration (Basset 1993: 1773–1788). From a social perspective, the arts and culture are recognized to generate a positive impact through direct participation, increasing levels of confidence, creativity, transferable skills, social commitment and social cohesion leading overall to more vibrant communities. Culture and the arts have often been treated as much-needed *software* to complement the *hardware* provided by physical regeneration projects (Coca-Stefaniak et al. 2009: 207–215). Cities in the world are using their cultural offerings as a tool to shape their tourist products and as the main message of their promotional activities (Kavaratzis 2011: 336–339). Culture in the form of urban history, architecture, cultural facilities and events sharpens the city's image and strengthens the local identity. It is widely considered as a catalyst in the process of transforming city space and giving new life into an ailing community or space (Kunzmann 2004: 384–404).

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