

The Human Factor in the Revitalization of the Historic Polish Cities

Robert Masztalski^(✉)

Faculty of Architecture, Wrocław University of Technology, Wrocław, Poland
robert.masztalski@pwr.edu.pl

Abstract. There are cities in Poland, which suffered as a result of World War 2, and after 66 years is still not rebuilt. This is particularly true of historic towns with historical pedigree. The monument conservators trying to keep full control over the reconstruction of these city centers and are blocking investment processes. Revitalization of these areas needs to be redefined in terms of procedures of conservation of cultural heritage in the context of modern ergonomic requirements. Case study is the city of Strzelin in the south-west Poland.

Keywords: Modern ergonomic requirements · Revitalization · Historic cities in Poland

1 Introduction

2nd half of the twentieth century was not lucky for the small towns of Lower Silesia. Most of them survived the war with more or less damage. The scale of devastation in the case of the Strzelin town center reached even 90 %. The destruction of small towns of Lower Silesia as a result of World War 2 of up to 50 % or more, occurred in such units as: Międzybórz, Wasocz, Nowogrodzic, Bierutów, Ścinawa, Pięnsk, Sobotka, Syców, Trzebnica, Wołów, Strzelin, Brzeg Dolny, Chojnow and Strzegom. The damage of less than 50 % occurred in towns such as Lubomierz, Prochowice, Katy Wrocławskie, Zmigrod, Przemków, Środa Śląska, Lwówek Śląski, Milicz, Góra. This means that this problem affects one third of the small towns of Lower Silesia. This problem is one of the most important determinants of the development of these towns. Many of them still cannot cope with this “heritage”. This issue is discussed in detail in the publication entitled “The transformation of the spatial structure of small towns in Lower Silesia after 1945” (Masztalski 2005, pp. 80–88) These towns and villages of Lower Silesia generally are of medieval origin. Locations of most of them were taking place between 1242 and 1399 (respectively Strzegom and Sobotka). The towns of Lower Silesia developing over the centuries, in 1939 reached a certain state of urbanised spaces, which over the next 6 years was at different times and to different degrees destroyed. Some of these towns lost most of its historic downtown buildings. Such towns are: Trzebnica, Strzelin, Pięnsk, Ścinawa, Brzeg Dolny, Wołów, Nowogrodzic, Syców. In the subsequent post-war decades, this group was joined by the new small towns in which the lack of political will and money for the renovation of existing residential and commercial downtown area building has led to a similar state of

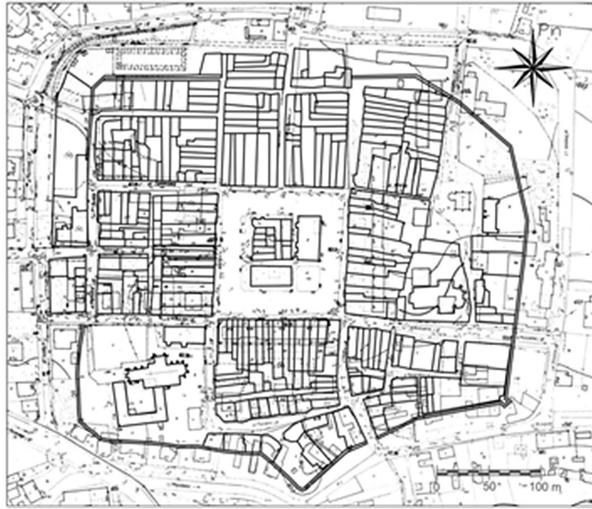


Fig. 1. Historic breaking up quarters on the basis of historical materials. (its own)

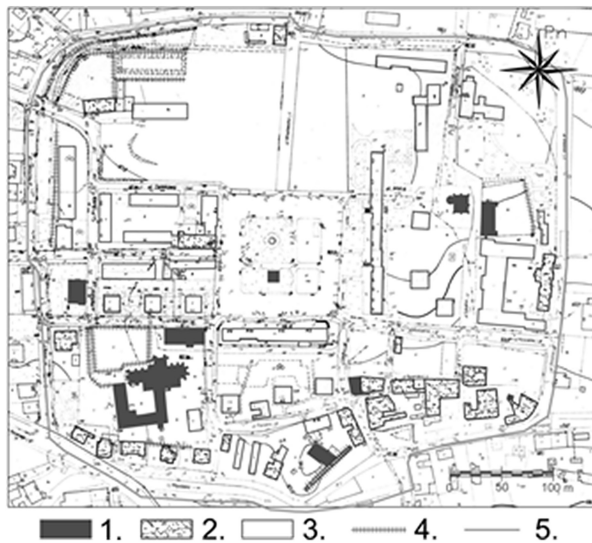


Fig. 2. Inventory of the Old Town buildings detailing the conservation of protected objects. Symbols: 1-objects included in the register of monuments; 2-objects that appear in the list of monuments of architecture and construction PSOZ; 3 other objects that exist; 4-historic walls, fences, 5-border development. (its own).

destruction. These towns are, primarily, small urban organisms, such as: Prusice, Lubomierz, Radków, Wlen, Wiazow.

The work of destruction was completed by a post-war policy of implementing the new, modernist building on the outskirts of towns. In some of the towns, where as a



Fig. 3. The concept of urban structure restoration of the Old Town Strzelin. Symbols: 1-crossing, crossings; 2-objects that exist; 3 to the elimination of existing facilities; 4-building service; 5-apartment housing; 6-building service and housing; 7-housing construction; 8-green park, recreation; 9-tree rows; 10-fence walls; 11-key strings of public communication; 12-border development; 13-line installation; 14-parking zone. (its own).

result of war damage virtually nothing remained of the historic town center, the so-called new urbanism was being created, based on ideological assumptions of the Athens Charter. The most spectacular examples of this kind of controversial actions can be observed in Trzebnica and Strzelin. Other towns were, in varying degrees and for different reasons, “beautified” with only single buildings. In this way the urban systems of Klodzko, Wolow, Sobotka, Sroda Slaska, and many other towns were destroyed. Only a few towns have managed to maintain in an almost intact state its historical urban layouts together with the original building that fills them. Among those few are Ziebice and Zabkowice Slaskie. An additional element of a destabilizing effect on the urban areas of Lower Silesia was the state of uncertainty as to further political fate of this part of Poland. The present population of these towns has been resettled from the former eastern territories of the Republic, and for many decades, they weren’t feeling at

home here. Throughout this period there prevailed a sense of temporariness here. This was not helping in restoring the identity of these towns in any form, whether it was based on the existing historic material culture or the heritage contained in the cultural identity of the resettled population. This state of affairs was additionally encouraging the authorities and decision-makers to experiment with various forms of urban planning and architecture activities, and the then heritage doctrine was often focused on discovering and exposing of so-called “signs of the Slavic heritage” - especially in small towns. The bottom line is, the period of the 2nd half of the twentieth century was not a lucky time for the small towns of Lower Silesia.

2 Spatial Development of Strzelin in the 2nd Half of the Twentieth Century

The population of Strzelin in 1939 was 12,337 [2] residents, and in 1946, according to the General Summary Census, there was only 7334 [2] inhabitants remained in the town. Population policy of the relocation of the local German population, carried out by the then administrative authorities of the country, led to the further reduction of the number of Strzelin inhabitants. Only in the late fifties, after the political changes of the year 1956 the increased population growth took place. From this point the town population was growing at a steady rate of several percent per year. In the eighties of the twentieth century, the town has reached pre-war population, but since the end of the nineties of the twentieth century a slow decreasing of the population could be seen. In the 2000 the town was inhabited by 13,228 people, and at the end of 2010, the number of inhabitants was 12,113 people.

Parallel to the increase in the number of inhabitants the urbanized areas of the town were developing. The largest increase in the urban area occurred in the seventies and eighties. At the same time it is characteristic that in the eighties, they invested mainly in the outskirts of the town, with no interest in the town center undeveloped since the war. The historical shape of the town market has been changed as a result of war damage and the post-war buildings and the currently existing town market space has dimensions of 140 by 230 m (Figs. 1 and 2). The empty spaces left after the buildings demolished during the fighting in 1945 and after the World War II, in the sixties was complemented by modernist residential buildings, what substantially changed the proportions of the square.

The shape of the historic town market in Strzelin is readable only by the granite pavement of the square. The town market frontage virtually ceased to exist as a result of the warfare. Until today there are only some of the western facade buildings preserved as well as the House of the Princes of Brzeg closing the market in the corner, which was rebuilt after the war. The design work on the concept of rebuilding the destroyed old town of Strzelin was started in the mid-60 s. The concept assumed the demolition of all buildings completed before 1945, leaving only the religious buildings, school buildings, a small complex of residential buildings at the Kosciuszki Street and two buildings At the Wodna Street. Fortunately, they failed to realize that vision to its completion. Significant areas still remained not developed. Based on this project only two frontages of the market were developed. Only eastern and southern frontage was built with prefabricated blocks

of flats, simultaneously changing its proportions. The development line was moved well over 10 m, completely changing the spatial shape and climate of this most important place in the town. In addition, failure to restore the block of mid-market building together with the Town Hall and Town Hall tower, changed the human friendly centre into a void, anonymous space. The hostile space, without the characteristic points, restrictions and view closures in which a man feels alienated.

Today, the market square centre is occupied by a green square with the remains of the currently reconstructed town hall tower (Fig. 3). In the area of the pre-existing quarters of the market square developments an open town market operates. The seat of the Municipal Council and District Office are located away from the town center. The market is neglected and not well maintained. The residential and commercial buildings located in the vicinity of the main transport hub of the town took over the role of the town centre. Towards the railway station there is a district from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was less destroyed during the war and part of the pre-war buildings have been used here for offices. The outskirts of the town are dominated by the post-war blocks of multi-family housing and one family housing.

For many years after the war, the construction investments in the town were limited to the reconstruction and modernization of existing, partially damaged and neglected buildings. A significant increase in new development occurred only in the late sixties and early seventies. The eighties initiated the realization of the large number of detached houses. Multi-family residential development virtually ceased to be realized. In 1994, a local spatial development plan of the town was enacted. It sanctioned the heritage protection zones and banned the developing of the Old Town in a manner inconsistent with the objectives of the heritage protection. For the next 15 years nothing new was built in this area. The town centre of Strzelin has become a kind of ghetto, which deterred with emptiness in the urban as well as the social space. The town authorities have unsuccessfully tried for many years to revitalize the area but without the determined change in the attitude of the Heritage Office the area will be deterring with the emptiness for the next few decades. The problem of creation of the modern Strzelin town centre on the ruins of the urban system from the 1939 requires redefining and setting new modern principles and priorities of the reconstruction of this part of the town.

3 Ways Revitalization of Historic Cities

For many years in the Polish town planning reality we come across what might be called “radical conservatory doctrine”. A manifestation of this approach is an attempt to have heritage preservation board control over as many buildings as possible. The Heritage Protection and Preservation Act in the first article says that: “The act specifies the subject, scope and forms of heritage protection and preservation, the creation of a national program for Heritage Protection and Preservation and the financing of restoration works, renovation and construction works on historical monuments as well as organization of heritage protection services” [3]. In subsequent articles the act explains in detail how to evaluate and protect historic buildings. In this part of the statutory regulations are clear and undisputed. But in 2010 this just task of protecting cultural heritage was - without a reason - extended in the following manner. Following sentence: “The projects and

changes in the space development plan of the region and in the local spatial development plan are subject to consultation with the regional inspector of monuments” was expanded to include the words: “in forming the housing development and land management.” [3]. This means that not only objects under the heritage protection but even the contemporary planned buildings will be subject to agreement by the heritage conservation services regarding the form and method of land management. Why someone wanted the heritage conservation services to control the way of shaping the development and management of the areas that are not the subject to heritage protection? Could it be that the only correct architectural and urban ideas was the domain of the officials of the Regional Conservators of Historic Monuments only? Or perhaps some over-zealous officials want to enrich the concrete housing estates from the 70 s with the steep roofs covered with tiles in natural color of ceramics?

Such activities could be associated with attempts to halt the progress of civilization and with strive to create a kind of open air museum of architecture and urbanism from the days before World War 2. Another surprising thing is the lack of constant reminders from the Boards of professional architects and planners about this curiosity and the lack of desire to fix it. The search for the contemporary urban doctrine must begin with a complete denial of the current provisions of law on spatial planning and development, starting with the Act on The Profession of Town Planner and the Spatial Planning and Development Act, through all the separate laws related to urban planning and space management and ending with the implementing regulations referring to them. The current Acts are a patchwork of random and inconsistent legal provisions, resulting from the actions of the subsequent parliamentary lobbys. These regulations are so “infected” with the subsequent conjectural and lobbystic updates and amendments, that they do not give a chance to repair the current space management law. The space management law must be rewritten anew and in isolation from the momentary political coalitions and local lobbying needs.

It has been publicly said about such principles as sustainable development and spatial order that are permanently engraved into current legal regulations. And that’s it because those who established them were only interested in them until the end of the legislative process. What counts afterwards is a pragmatism, a business logic, political correctness and measurable economic benefits. The effects of the current heritage conservation policy are the projects - unfinished for decades, that rebuild the war-damaged downtown areas of such towns as Elblag, Głogow, Strzelin and many others. In addition, we have many buildings maintained in a state of so-called “permanent ruin”, what comes from rather megalomaniac martyrdom than from their desire to maintain the cultural heritage (Figs. 4 and 5).

The Regional Inspector of Monuments Services were transformed from the power protecting the most valuable achievements of the material culture of our country into a fundamental slowing down factor of reasonable civilization changes in our urbanized area. The register and documentation of historical monuments evolved from a tool of protection into a tool of blind repression. In most cases, the heritage conservation management is limited to the search for the forms that reproduce or rather imitate the historical past. This leads to the formation of the most bizarre architectural forms.

The documenting of the history and cultural heritage evolved into the creation of artificial sets, based on motives that try to be historical. Any progress towards modern



Fig. 4. Project of reconstruction of historic buildings in the center - a first floor view's (its own)

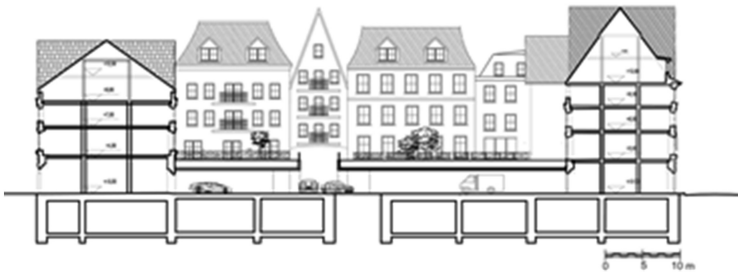


Fig. 5. Project of reconstruction of historic buildings in the center - vertical section. (its own)

technology and the needs of the information civilization is blocked. Not all towns have to look like design models from different periods of the past centuries. It's just about time to start creating the bustling modern towns in place of the ruins and archaeological remains, instead of increasingly degrading areas that count on tourist and sponsors with an open and unrestricted bank account. Today it is easier to build businesses on the outskirts of the town than to invest money in archaeological research, that nobody can predict how and when they will end.

4 Summary

After 70 years since the end of World War 2 in the downtowns of many small towns of Poland, we can still see the empty tracts of land which are remnants of wartime and postwar devastation. These spaces are often not built-up because the existing heritage

protection policy with its fundamentalism turns the existing architectural relics of the past into ruin or causes their rapid physical elimination from our surroundings. The reason for this is the thoughtless recognition of each architectural object realized before 1945 as a monument worthy of protection. Why it's not possible to plan the demolition of the object, which - apart from the date of creation - has no other rational reason for continued existence. The lack of reflection and realistic assessment of what is worth protecting and what is likely to survive without government financial assistance is a fundamental shortcoming of current conservation policy. The space finally must be created for the investment modernization and renovation activities without any interference and any heritage conservation requirements. And finally we should demand more faith in logic and reason of local authorities, architects and investors. One of those abnormal situations is no downtown site planning for most of damaged by war old town areas. Such city, which has got that problem is Strzelin, where for 70 post-war years no one was able to face the problem of downtown building reconstruction. It had its consequences, because it changed centre of gravity for administration and service from old town to other parts of the city.

References

1. Masztalski, R.: The transformation of the spatial structure of small towns in Lower Silesia after 1945, Wrocław (2005)
2. Statistics towns and settlements 1945–1965, Central Statistical Office, Warsaw (1967)
3. The Act of 23 July 2003 on the conservation and care of monuments, Polish Journal of Laws, Warsaw (2003)