Revitalisation of Historic Centres in Small Towns of Warmia – in Search of Creative Spaces

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Abstract. Warmia is a historic land where twelve towns founded in the Middle Ages have survived until our time. All of them (except Olsztyn) can be classified as small urban centres. Their location was dictated by a combination of military and topographic considerations. In the past, these towns were protected by castles and fortified walls, while their layout was developed according to the medieval principles of urbanistic composition. Revitalisation of small Warmian towns is a problem that mostly concerns their historic centres, which are a manifestation of the town’s identity. The part of a town called the Old Town comprises both public and private spaces over its relatively small area. The complexity of elements which create these structures (spatial factors, such as the urbanistic and architectural components, preservation of historic buildings, economic and social issues) forces us to seek for such transformations that will expose and revive the functionality of a town’s historic centre against the backdrop of its other areas. This is where the need to shape creative spaces within the town’s historic area can find its justification. The above issues are the main objective of this article.

1. Introduction
Situated in the north-eastern part of Poland, Warmia is a historical land which, together with the adjacent region called Mazury, is referred to as the Land of a Thousand Lakes. The conquest of these lands by the Order of Teutonic Knights in the 13th century gave rise to the foundation of twelve Warmian towns, all of which – except Olsztyn – are now classified as small ones. The population of each of these towns ranges from a few to no more than twenty thousand people. The exact location of these towns in the Middle Ages was dictated by military and topographic considerations (urban fortifications built on sites which were difficult to access) and the layout was planned in line with the medieval principles of urban composition. The idea was to create a check-board pattern of streets, to plan a market square with a town hall in the middle, and to build townhouses in compact blocks between streets (Figure 1). The urban landscape was dominated by three most important and largest buildings, that is a church in one of the corner land lots at the market square, a town hall located centrally, as mentioned above, and a castle, lying somewhat at a distance and connected with the system of urban fortifications [1]. The military genesis of the Warmian towns stemmed from the policy of the Teutonic Order – all the towns had
fortified castles and the distance from one town to another was 15-30 km [2]. This explains the uniform character of urban development in the whole region.

The development of the Warmian towns proceeded under similar location-related, functional and, above all, spatial conditions, which to a large extent underpins the synthetic character of this research object [4]. Despite being based on similar assumptions, arising from the way they were planned and the time when they were founded, the twelve towns discussed here possess quite diverse spatial structures. Differences occur mainly in the ways in which the inner traffic system has been solved, the size and proportions of market squares, the location of the town’s main and largest buildings, and the contemporary state of preservation of the townhouses. The dominant element in the composition of these towns, in most cases, is the historic area called the Old Town, which – same as centuries ago – plays the role of the town centre. Nevertheless, the state of preservation of these historic neighbourhoods in the towns of Warmia, compared to the original urban layouts and the architecture of buildings, is rather varied. There are two principal reasons. One is the outcome of the last months of World War Two, when the Red Army took to the purposeful and mass-scale demolition of the historic buildings, blinded by the slogan „Down with the memory of Prussia“ (since 1772, Warmia was within the territory of East Prussia). The other reason was the way in which post-war reconstruction of these towns was carried out, completely detached from the scale and character of the town centres but in line with the political system imposed in Poland after the war. Social realism in architecture and lack of respect to the historically grounded foundations of old towns were evident. The consequences of these actions can be still seen in many towns across the region.

The contemporary spatial structure of the historic centres in the Warmian towns reflects the region’s poor economic condition, which includes a high unemployment rate and migration of the population to larger towns and cities. Therefore, all activities undertaken in order to shape creative spaces in towns should be accompanied by efforts to establish an economic and social base of development. Considering the absence of mineral resources, it seems that an available solution is to turn to the hospitality and tourist industry, whose potential is not yet fully exploited in the whole region. What it involves is the development of revitalisation and restoration programmes, which – when implemented – will have influence on the functions and form of the towns. They will also enhance the historic identity of these towns and aid the preservation of the cultural heritage in the entire region [5].

The problems connected with the revitalisation of Warmia’s small towns mostly pertain to their old, historic centres, which are a manifestation of their identity. The so-called Old Towns aggregate, over a
relatively small area, both public and private spaces. The historic town centres are where all kinds of goods, material and spiritual ones, are exchanged. The complexity of elements which constitute the these structures (spatial factors – regarding urban design and architecture, preservation of historic buildings, economic and social considerations), means that planned transformations should lead to a better exposure and functional revival of such historic centres against the background of other urban areas. The key to the successful performance of these objectives is to develop programmes for revitalisation of old-town complexes in the medieval towns of Warmia.

2. Description of research methods
The selected research area comprised:
- spatial structures of old town centres in small towns of Warmia, in the context of preservation of the original urbanistic and architectural plans,
- adaptation of the historic centres to the contemporary specific character of functions performed by a small town,
- search for creative spaces in the historic inner town areas.

The adopted research methodology encompasses many aspects, which are a reflection of the complexity of urban functions. It involves a series of studies, for example, analyses of iconographic materials and field inventories of existing structures in terms of the preservation of original plans and the shape of contemporary creative spaces in the historic centres of towns, which in the Warmian towns are additionally assigned the status of heritage conservation areas. Owing to the applied methods, it was possible to evaluate the space in the context of possible investments into historic structures and enhanced functions of historic town areas, which will satisfy the contemporary requirements regarding functions and use, while preserving the spatial order. Results of the analyses laid the foundation for developing guidelines underlying the implementation of the subsequent method, which consisted of the valorisation and revitalisation of old town complexes. Valorisation is achieved through technical solutions applied to urbanistic patterns, groups of buildings along streets or surrounding town squares as well as other architectural objects or green areas; on the other hand, revitalisation surpasses purely technical matters and aims to achieve an economic and social revival of historic centres in towns. This multi-faceted revival of the space in a town’s centre, in all small towns of Warmia, is strongly connected with efforts to identify the foundations for their sustainable growth and to shape creative spaces in the historic centres. The above problem has been presented as a framework of general guidelines, which will need to be made more specific at further stages of detailed studies, as each town, despite numerous similarities, has individual characteristics and functions slightly differently.

3. Spatial structures of small towns in Warmia
The urban development in Warmia, which occurred in the Middle Ages, led to the foundation of twelve towns, of which only one, namely Olsztyn – the regional and provincial capital city – does not fit in the category of small towns. Two other towns, Braniewo and Frombork, are distinguished by specific developmental and functional circumstances as they were the only Warmian towns which for centuries served as seaports [6]. This is the reason why their spatial structures should be dealt with in a separate study.

The development of all the other Warmian towns proceeded under quite similar conditions regarding the location, functions and, above all, spatial characteristics. This justifies the synthetic character of the present research. The analysed towns are: Barczewo, Biskupiec Reszelski, Bisztynek, Dobre Miasto, Jeziornany, Lidzbark Warmiński, Orneta, Pieniężno and Reszel.

The street plans of the Warmian towns have remained readable until our times and reveal the characteristics of original settlements. They consist of check-board patterns of regularly spaced streets, which divide a town’s area into house lots, with a market square located in the centre. A whole town
covered a relatively small area (on average 6 ha) densely filled with buildings, while certain deformations in some of the patterns were due to specific topographic features and the proximity of watercourses and water bodies (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** Street plans of small towns in Warmia in the 1950s. Explanation: a – Barczewo, b – Biskupiec Reszelski. Source: [7]

The landscape of Warmia, with rolling hills and numerous lakes, made the town’s founders choose such locations where natural features of the environment ensured the defensive character of settlements. Thus, most of the towns were situated in a bend of a river or along its course, in a fork of two rivers or on a steep hill (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** The planning of towns in Warmia – street plans dating to the mid-20th century. Explanation: a – Reszel, b – Lidzbark Warmiński. Source: [7]
Despite bearing some similarities as a result of having been established around the same time, the urban structures of the Warmian towns display quite a wide variety of solutions, one reason being specific local conditions. Differences can be seen in the shape of a central market square, its proportions as well as the solutions applied to traffic routes. In each case, the area of a town was enclosed within relatively regular geometrical shapes. They resemble rectangles or squares with a preserved axis of symmetry [8]. The street plan was most often orientated towards the north-west or north direction, depending on the town’s expected functions and the natural conditions [9].

In each town, the central market square is an outstanding element of the spatial plan. Lying in the heart of a medieval town, the market square played a crucial role in trade, simultaneously acting as a public space [10]. Its shape, proportions and size affected the organisation of the town’s inner structure. These parameters depended on the field conditions and on existing traffic routes, some pre-dating the location of a town. Thus, in each case, the planning of a new town or settlement was adjusted to the specific characteristics of a given area, and was not a repeated template.

The current state of preservation of the original urban plans, the scale and character of the development and buildings in the Warmian towns are quite diverse. While most of the urban settlements have survived in an almost unchanged urban layout, there are examples among these towns where the solutions implemented in the 1960s and 1970s added a new dimension to the identity of a town’s centre. This demonstrated a complete lack of respect to historical solutions. The space of the market square in Dobre Miasto or in Biskupiec Reszelski was converted to a roundabout, which became the main traffic hub in the town. The heavy traffic of vehicles passing through the town centre (transit traffic to the border checkpoint in Bezledy) distorts the small-town nature of this square.

Our perception of urban space is strongly influenced by the architecture of historic centres of towns, especially by monumental edifices which belong to the cultural heritage of the region. Same as centuries before, they are dominant elements in the town’s skyline. The preserved churches, castles and town halls show characteristic traits of the red-brick Gothic architecture, typical for this region. To a large extent, these buildings created the medieval composition of the towns, and today they are also significant components of the spatial management in these central areas [11] (Figure 4).

![Figure 4. Monumental edifices in the Warmian towns. Explanation: a) – castle in Lidzbark Warmiński, b) – parish church in Pieniężno. Photo: author](image)

Examples of the contemporary architecture found in the historic areas of the towns are quite diverse. Particular attention should be drawn to Orneta and Reszel. The spatial layouts of these two towns are
among the best preserved medieval urban settlements in Warmia. The architecture found in the old towns of Orneta and Reszel is deeply rooted in the historic context. It is dominated by the richness of forms, all maintained in the similar scale, divisions, rhythms, details and light pastel colours. The accumulation of residential functions with services and trade facilities located on the ground floors of houses strengthens the association of the Old Town with the centre of a small urban settlement. It also has a positive influence on shaping creative spaces in the centres of these towns.

The architecture in the other towns of Warmia looks completely different. The post-war reconstruction drastically changed the space in many of these urban complexes. Examples can be seen among buildings surrounding the market squares of Dobre Miasto, Bisztynek, Lidzbark Warmiński or Pieniężno. Alienated architecture or vacant lots have no connection whatsoever with the historic models. What is lacking are compactly developed, elongated lots, small divisions on the facades of townhouses or small-scale, one- or two-storey houses, which all formed the style typical of small, historical towns [12]. The towns mentioned above had large proportions of their centres deformed, for example lines of rows of buildings were shifted and townhouses were replaced by monolithic blocks. The time period when new buildings were erected coincided with the use of means of architectural expression that complied with the era of socialism, but they brought havoc to the urban structure which had been shaped over the past centuries (Figure 5). The post-war development of these old towns now calls for certain repair measures, to revive the spirit of the place (the genius loci) and to search for creative spaces.

Figure 5. Houses along the sides of market squares. Explanation: a – Reszel, b – Dobre Miasto.
Photo: author

4. Revitalisation of old town complexes – in search for creative spaces
The spatial structures of old centres in the Warmian towns need revitalisation. The restoration of their functional capabilities, as an expression of the continuation of historic solutions, aims to expose the spatial elements of these historic areas against the background of other parts of a town, but also to adjust them to today’s needs and to improve the quality of life for its residents [13]. A town is a living organism, whose structure should respond to the changing demands of an evolving environment. Hence, when designing revitalisation programmes, it is necessary to perform in-depth analyses and to identify target directions (Figure 6).

Restoration of degraded areas is an action undertaken to promote positive spatial, economic and social solutions. Mutual relationships between these factors mean that revitalisation is a long-term process [14]. The economic and social problems that many of the towns in Warmia struggle with, such as unemployment or migration of young people to larger towns, determine the range of possible transformations within their space, mainly in the historic centres, and these restrictions do not facilitate the search for creative spaces.
The approaches to the renovation of historic centres, regardless of the employed method and terminology, share certain properties. The starting point to developing revitalisation programmes is an analysis of historical facts connected with a given town. Such an analysis allows us to identify the causes of events responsible for the contemporary image of the analysed town. The major obstacle which prevents many small towns from functioning adequately is their poor economic status, leading to degradation of social life, which in turn has an adverse impact on the inner town space. The dependence between spatial, socio-economic and cultural factors justifies the claim that the proposed method of revitalisation of the historic centres in the Warmian towns is their only chance to develop while preserving their architectural identity [15]. The principal assumptions behind revitalisation are that it should:

- improve the appeal of the Old Town against the backdrop of the other town’s areas,
- impose hierarchy of space in particular urban areas (the urban system, differentiation of architecture),
- aggregate centre-stimulating functions (commerce, services),
- ensure accessibility via means of transportation,
- emphasise the sense of identity and community among residents,
- improve the living standard of local communities.

The above considerations should help us to identify an overall goal of revitalisation, which is at the core of spatial policy, based on the sustainable development of towns and inclusive of the preservation of cultural values of their historic centres. However, it can be extremely difficult to achieve this aim in many of the towns in Warmia where town centre is either poorly identified or depopulated.

Taking measures in order to develop revitalisation programmes is also associated with some threats and limitations, which holds true for the towns in Warmia as well. One such risk arises from the old habits formed when so-called detailed valorisation plans used to be in order. Typically, those plans included analyses of the current state, designing buildings that would fill in gaps in the existing structure and
ignoring historical research. An attempt to protect historical towns using methods borrowed from the nature preservation techniques resulted in the creation of ‘urban reserves’, which disagrees with the essence of such a specific type of monument of architecture as a town [16].

5. Revitalisation of the former town moat in Jeziorany – shaping a creative space

An example of an implemented programme designed to restore some historic space in a town in Warmia is the revitalisation of the area historically occupied by a moat surrounding the town Jeziorany. This area, historically important for the defence of the town, lies in the Protected Landscape Area of the Symsarna River Valley. Until recently, it was overgrown with unkempt greenery, stretching around three sides of the old town in Jeziorany (Figure 7). Included in the revitalisation programme designed for the historic centre of Jeziorany, it was the first element completed in the creation of a new quality of the space in the town’s heart (the plan was authored by M. Zagroba).

Figure 7. The town moat in Jeziorany. Explanation: the red line – the greenery surrounding the historic old town. Source: developed by the author on the basis of http://www.zamki.pl/?idzamku=jeziorany&dzial=galeria

The moat in Jeziorany covers a green area of 16 ha, lying deeper than the surroundings, which distinctly separates the town’s centre from the other neighbourhoods. The local government in Jeziorany declared that proper development and management of the former moat would be one of their priority tasks. The planned and implemented design contains urbanistic and architectural spatial solutions with a division into functional spheres and forms of their composition, including the choice of plant species and items of street architecture. The main assumption underlying the design and its implementation was to organise this greenery area located in the town centre by creating a public space to serve recreational purposes, while maintaining the order in the existing urban landscape (Figure 8). This is particularly important when a devised plan concerns a space that all town residents identify themselves with.
Figure 8. The development of the former moat in Jeziorany. Explanation: a – the main walking path, b – the main descent. Photo: author

The idea behind the design solutions was to create a readable division of the area into two main spheres, with a different type of functions. They are: the sacred sphere, an area to meditate and pray, located near the church and parish graveyard, and the profane sphere, that is an area intended for various forms of recreation, both active and passive relaxation as well as education. The whole composition is made complete by using environmentally friendly materials, which in combination with forms of greenery, highlight the building tradition of the region of Warmia.

Revitalisation of the town moat in Jeziorany is a positive example of spatial solutions and formation of creative spaces in the centre of a small, historic town. It is also evidence that the development and execution of programmes to repair the urban structure has a beneficial effect on town centres and their economic and social growth. Similar measures have a strong impact on creating ‘the atmosphere’ of a site (the genius loci) in the urban landscape, which in turn strengthens considerably the sense of bonds within the local community.

6. Conclusions

Revitalisation of degraded areas in historic centres of small towns is a chance to restore the capability of old town areas to function well. This is the problem that revolves around spatial issues, improvement of the quality of life for local communities and creating opportunities for economic growth. The development and implementation of revitalisation programmes is a complex and long-term process of urban restoration and as such requires integrated and multi-aspect actions. The complex nature of this problem calls for an interdisciplinary approach when designing and executing revitalisation programmes. The high rank of historic centres in towns means that any planning and design efforts must be thoroughly considered, paying respect to the historically founded town area submitted to revitalisation while satisfying the contemporary expectations and aspirations.

The elements of the impact of revitalisation on planning a sustainable development of the historic centres in the small towns of Warmia, presented in this paper, provide a general framework for an approach to historic space. It needs to be emphasised that each town has specific features, despite sharing many similarities. It is therefore impossible to prepare a systematic set of design solutions for all the towns. In each case, it is necessary to make complex analyses in order to investigate the problem.

Based on the aspects presented in this article and pertaining to the development of programmes designed for the sake of revitalisation of historic town areas, the following conclusions can be drawn, regarding benefits obtained from the implementation of such projects:
shaping urbanistic systems and architectural complexes in accord with the original assumptions allows us to create spatial order and to distinguish the old town area in the urban developed space,
the small-town character of the centre is highlighted by small-size buildings, fine divisions and subtle architectural details,
modern architecture (form, dimensions, spatial distribution, materials, etc.) should be rooted in the context of historical architecture,
additional investment into commerce and service as well as residential functions of the town’s historic centre emphasises the centre-stimulating role of this urban area. Making a precise specification of these functions is difficult at the stage of planning as they will be verified by the market demands,
creating a friendly space in the old town contributes to the prestigious character of the old town and has an effect on the whole town’s development,
positive spatial solutions have a strong social influence – a high-culture space makes us more willing to stay and return to likeable places.

What is particularly challenging in any effort to revitalise a historic town centre is that it must protect the cultural heritage of this area while restoring or improving the usable functions of whole urban complexes and strengthening the social integration. However, employment of the modern-day means to revitalise the historic towns of Warmia is a chance for us to adopt their central areas to contemporary needs and aspirations of towns and town residents. Revitalisation outcome serves to protect specific values, both material and spiritual ones.

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