Multifunctional Public Space As Exemplified By the Concept of the Development of Kopernik Square in Opole

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Abstract. In 2015 the authorities of the city of Opole decided to sell a part of Kopernik Square, one of the main city squares, to a private investor. The objective of this project was the extension of the existing shopping mall and the construction of an underground car park within the scope of a public-private partnership. In order to find the best solution to design the remaining part of the square, a competition for its development was announced in cooperation with the Opole branch of the Association of Polish Architects. The article presents a description of the studies and analyses of the aforementioned space conducted by the db2 architekci architectural studio for the purpose of preparing a competition entry. The square development concept was based on an analysis of the urban context of the Opole city centre. The character of the public spaces within a twenty-minute walk from Kopernik Square was analysed. In the course of the works, a decision was made to develop the public space in a manner different from that originally intended by the Investor. A graphic visualization of the maximum scope of the shopping mall extension was presented in accordance with the urban layout of this part of the city, allowing the preservation of the historical view corridors. The article presents a competition entry prepared by us along with a justification of decisions concerning the design. One of the fundamental design assumptions was the connection of all frontages with the square and the creation of a recreational part abounding in green areas. The concept provided for the division of the area into three parts of various characters. The central part of the square is a green area of a recreational character – a space so far absent in the city centre. Catering and food services, shops, parking spaces for bicycles as well as services related to the parking area are located at the southern frontage of the square under one roofing. The area directly adjoining the shopping mall is an open multifunctional and partly roofed square - a place where cyclical events are held in the city. The project allows for a harmonious combination of various functions performed by Kopernik Square. The adopted traffic solutions, in particular the entrance to and exit from the underground car park have a positive influence on road traffic in this part of the city. Due to maintaining the historical urban layout and view corridors, the new building development does not overwhelm the square space but constitutes its harmonious closure.

1. Introduction

Kopernik Square is one of the most important public spaces in Opole, a city with a population of more than 127,000 people. As a result of the city authorities’ attempts to find funds to replenish the city budget, in 2015 a decision was made to sell a part of the square to a private investor whose plans provided for the extension of the existing shopping mall at the expense of the generally available space. In order to guarantee a suitable functional solution for the remaining part of the square, a competition was organized in cooperation with the Opole branch of the Association of Polish Architects. The urban planning and architectural competition for the development of Kopernik Square was an all-Poland open event with a research character. Thirteen teams from all over Poland participated in it. The competition results were to serve as guidelines for the private investor in the square development plan.
2. The reasons and objectives of the studies

The competition regulations specified the scope of the planned extension of the existing shopping mall. It exceeded the building alignment of Kosny Street and was completely contradictory to the spatial and historical context of the square surroundings. A decision was made to analyse the city centre space with a view to the competition objectives in order to propose a solution aiming at a suitable development of the public space in Kopernik Square.

3. The object and area of the studies – the history and the current development of Kopernik Square

Kopernik Square is located in the central part of the city, about 250 metres to the east of the central market square. It is one of the most important historical architectural interior spaces of the city. A Dominican Order monastery situated on a neighbouring hill, the highest place in the city, was first mentioned in the 13th century. In the early 19th century the monastery buildings were first transformed into a school for nurses and subsequently into a hospital which existed until 1990 when the facilities were taken over by the University of Opole. The western slope of the hill, the future Kopernik Square, was occupied by limestone workings and lime kilns, and earlier by vineyards. In 1860 the Pringsheim brewery was built here, and the space was thus divided into two smaller squares: Karlsplatz and Wilhelmsplatz. The current form of Kopernik Square was developed in the middle of the 19th century. On the eastern side of the square, the area is limited by the frontage of Reymont Street, while on the southern side – by housing and service facilities. The less regular western frontage of the square is shaped by the characteristic building of the baroque church of Our Lady of Sorrows on the Hill, the building of the 19th century hospital, and the building of the neo-Gothic orphanage – currently, the seat of Collegium Maius and Collegium Minus of the University of Opole. Until the 1970s the northern frontage had been limited by the brewery buildings; their building alignment was an extension of Kosny Street frontage. This historically conditioned urban planning solution guaranteed a proper exposure of the most characteristic western frontage of the square.

The internal area is a space definitely requiring an intervention. It has the shape of a rectangle, sloping to the south. At present there is an on-grade parking area with a considerably devastated surface. Due to the absence of a proper quality public space and the level of degradation, the square is not perceived by the city inhabitants as an attractive place. The function of a parking area has dominated all other functions which the square might and should perform in Opole.

On the eastern side, the square is crossed by the two-way Reymont Street, which is an access road to the city centre, and the nearby shopping mall with its own car park. The square reconstruction plans provide for a two-storey underground car park with access from Reymont Street. In the Investor's vehicle traffic concept, the access roads were located at the southern frontage of the square, which would separate it permanently from the generally accessible space.

4. Space analyses

The type, size, and character of the public spaces located within a twenty minute walk from Kopernik Square were analysed. The architectural and urban planning solution was based on this analysis.

Market Square. The main city square of Opole, with a centrally situated city hall building. It functions as a walking area, is equipped with urban furniture; outdoor concerts, exhibitions and thematic holiday fairs are organized there. In summer, its western part is occupied by restaurant and coffee shop pavilions. Market square and Krakowska Street crossing it constitute the main traffic route of the strict city centre.

Little Market Square. Located at Krakowska Street, it has the shape of a triangle. It was reconstructed in 2015 on the basis of a design concept selected in an all-Poland architectural competition. Since then, with its coffee shops and pubs, it has functioned as a meeting place of young people. Maintaining the historical building layout, the square development was rearranged and, due to the use of the modern means of expression, the quality of the public space was considerably improved.
Figure 1. An analysis of the public spaces in the city centre. Source: the db2 architekci design studio’s own elaboration [1]

St. Sebastian Square. It is a small square in the neighbourhood of the historical baroque St. Sebastian church dating back to the 17th century. Its character is defined by the green areas of a rather disorganized character. It serves as a recreational place for the inhabitants of the neighbouring tenement houses.

The Barlicki Pond. A recreational area located near the Opole amphitheatre, reconstructed in 2013. It is a walking area and a recreational place; in summer outdoor concerts and multimedia shows with the fountain in the background are held here.

Freedom Square. Located near the Młynówka Canal, it offers recreational areas where popular outdoor games are organized. Various outdoor events are held here, but its current development makes it difficult to erect a movable stage and other related equipment.

Ignacy Daszyński Square. One of Opole’s most beautiful squares, in the shape of a regular rectangle, surrounded on the four sides by the compact frontage of the five-storey tenement houses. Its central part is occupied by the historical fountain designed by Edmund Gomansky in 1907, representing the goddess of the harvest. In 2009 the fountain underwent a thorough preservation process and the square was revitalised. Since that time, this recreational area has been changing its character every year due to new plantings.

John Paul II Square. It is located next to the building of the Jan Kochanowski Theatre and the Modern Art Gallery. A part of it is occupied by an on-grade car park, while the remaining part – by green and walking areas. Due to its degradation, the space requires revitalization and the introduction of new urban functions connected with the nearby cultural institutions.

5. Analysis results
The conducted analyses prove that within a few minutes’ walk from Kopernik Square there is no ordered public space where city inhabitants could relax in green areas and far from vehicle traffic. At present they need to walk for at least twenty minutes towards the river and the public spaces located nearby in order to spend time in such places. This distance effectively discourages them from using these public spaces on weekdays. At present Kopernik Square is not perceived by city inhabitants as an attractive
public space. It is perceived as a parking area since this function has definitely become dominant. The previously described city squares, in particular those reconstructed in the recent years, prove that such city spaces are quite necessary. „If a better city space is provided, its use will increase” [2]. This principle is well visible in the analysed examples. Where the quality of city spaces has increased due to revitalization comprising, for instance, repairs of road surfaces, exchange of street lighting, building of fountains, introduction of new plantings, the number of its users has immediately grown, regardless of the season of the year. Consequently, considering various scenarios of its usage, after reconstruction Kopernik Square can become another attractive place on the map of Opole, which will undoubtedly have a positive influence on the attractiveness of the neighbouring areas as well.

6. **The architectural and urban planning concept for Kopernik Square**

One of the fundamental assumptions of the design proposed by the db2 architekci studio was the connection of all frontages with the square and the creation of a recreational part abounding in green areas in its centre. The concept provided for the division of Kopernik Square into three parts of various characters. The central part of the square is a green area of a recreational character – a space so far absent in the city centre. Catering and food services, shops, parking spaces for bicycles as well as services related to an underground car park are located at the southern frontage of the square under one roofing. The area directly adjoining the shopping mall is an open multifunctional and partly roofed square – a place where cyclical events are held in the city.

![Figure 2. A schematic diagram of the Square. Source: the db2 architekci design studio's own elaboration [1]](image)

Making a reference to the historical borders of the block development, in particular the extension of the building alignment in Kosny Street determining the limits of the shopping mall extension, will make it possible to maintain the view to the characteristic silhouette of the western frontage of the Square, with the church of Our Lady of Sorrows on the Hill and the reconstructed 19th century building of the University. The scale and proportions of the interior space of the city created in this way counterbalance the large volume of the shopping mall.

“Designing means to a large extent ordering and understanding” [3]. The design concept gives shape to the ordered interior space of the city and simultaneously indicates the maximum scope of the development of the northern frontage of the square, taking into consideration the historical and urban planning contexts. The continuation of the building alignment in Kosny Street is the only proper solution here. The extended shopping mall should not exceed this alignment; the restrictions do not refer to the underground part.
The project creates new meeting places in the city space. ‘An important factor is the quality of the city spaces. […] Invitations to do something outdoors other than just walking should include protection, security, a reasonable space, urban furniture, and visual quality’ [2]. Due to the division of the square into three zones, it will be possible to organize mass events here, people will be able to relax in the recreational area and take advantage of catering services. As a result of the proposed traffic solutions, vehicle traffic is maintained in Reymont Street, and the square frontage is well connected with the interior space. The concept provides for an extension of the road in the neighbourhood of the square in order to include both the entrance to and the exit from the underground car park within it. The proposal presented in the competition guidelines, with an entrance along the southern frontage of the square, permanently separates this part of the alignment from the square, and consequently the service facilities located on the ground floor lose their attractiveness. A direct connection between the frontage and the service facilities situated under one roofing was proposed. This catering and commercial function is a reference to a market place which used to be an important place on the map of Opole for a long time in the past. For several years, the bicycle route network and public transportation system have been developed in the city, whose objective is to encourage inhabitants to change their habits. The presented
concept fits this aspect well, giving priority to pedestrians and cyclists in the square space. In the extended Reymont Street artery there is also a bus stop, a parking space for tourist buses and a taxi rank.

![Figure 5. A view of the building alignment at the southern frontage of the square. Source: the db2 architekci design studio's own elaboration [1]](image)

Transport, commercial and catering-related functions are combined in the southern frontage of Kopernik Square under one roofing. There are a roofed exit from the underground car park and parking spaces for city and private bicycles there. An extra space is allocated to market stalls with fruit, vegetables and flowers; they are open here in the morning hours, until 1 pm. Further on, the space comprises restaurants and coffee shops on the ground floor of the southern frontage buildings. Some of these establishments offer outdoor services all day long. The central part separated by small green hillocks is a recreational area. One can move around it without limitations. Apart from movable park furniture, its permanent element is a small merry-go-round for children; it has a heating system and thus can function all year round.

![Figure 6. The interior of Kopernik Square. Source: the db2 architekci design studio's own elaboration, [1]](image)

The structural material of the building elements in the southern frontage of the square is metal with graphite finishing. In the central part of the square, trampling-resistant and fast growing sports lawns are planted. The composition is supplemented with various deciduous trees creating a border of the square. Two types of furniture are used in the green areas: metal tables with folding chairs and module polyethylene seats that can be combined in various forms. The perimeter of the green area is finished with a bench fitted with feature lighting and descending to the floor level in the entrances to the park. Characteristic metal lanterns and waste baskets constitute additional elements of the park. All the furniture and equipment are in various shades of green, which gives the space a unique character.
Figure 7. Entrance to the green area. Source: the db2 architekci design studio's own elaboration [1]

The part of the square located directly in front of the shopping mall is by definition multifunctional [4]. Its constant elements are a fountain built in the floor and an analemmatic sundial in which time is shown by a person standing in a field with a relevant date. The ground is flat to make various city activities possible. The surface of the open square and the area under the roof at the southern frontage is made of grey flamed granite slabs. The fountain adjunctures are hidden in the flooring near the shopping mall. There are green paths with a polyurethane surface in the recreational area in the central part of the square.

Figure 8. A view of the Square from Sienkiewicz Street. Source: the db2 architekci design studio's own elaboration [1]

7. Conclusions
The competition project proved it was possible to combine historical backgrounds and urban planning with a private investor's interests. The necessity to follow the clear urban planning guidelines in the location does not invalidate the extension of the shopping mall, and the creation of an inviting public space in its close vicinity additionally boosts its attractiveness. Starting the reconstruction of one of its main squares in the centre, the city authorities should above all be guided by inhabitants’ interest and respond to their needs. The presented concept allows for the functioning of various types of business activities in the square, addressed to inhabitants and public space users regardless of their age. A change of the square image in the public awareness would undoubtedly have a positive impact on inhabitants’ perception of the city as a living space. Despite architects’, city planners’ and some inhabitants’ protests, the authorities of Opole decided to sell almost one third of the square to a private investor, justifying the decision with the need to construct an underground car park there. The decision makes it impossible to maintain the historical and urban planning context as well as the characteristic view corridors. Perhaps people as the main users of this space should be given priority rather than motor vehicles; 'improving
the conditions for pedestrians, we not only increase their number but also, and most importantly, strengthen the life of the city [2]. People spontaneously look for places in the public area where they can spend time with other people. In such spaces, city life takes place and such places prove the city's attractiveness. The presented concept is an attempt to solve the problem of a multifunctional city space which co-exists, respecting the historical and urban planning context, and simultaneously fulfilling the city's current needs.

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