Revitalisation as a Method of Planning Sustainable Development of Old Town Complexes in Historic Towns

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Abstract. Old towns in spatial structures of historic towns are the areas which – same as centuries before – serve as the town centres. This is almost invariably true about small towns especially, as the inner town district is more frequently the site where a town was originally located and is often the manifestation of its historic identity. However, functional and spatial problems of many small historic towns arise from the above trend, mostly because of the frequently high density of buildings in the oldest part of a town. The intricate nature of elements creating the structure of a town’s historic centre often calls for certain steps to be taken, which will ensure better exposure of an old town complex against the backdrop of the town’s other areas. Numerous problems need to be solved, not only spatial but also economic and social ones. A town is a living organism, inhabited by people. The key to tackling these issues successfully lies in the creation of such revitalisation programmes that will improve the quality of space and help achieve the sustainable development of inner-town areas in historic towns. The historic centres in the medieval towns of Warmia, a region rich in history and situated in north-eastern Poland, can serve as an example and has been investigated in the following study. All the towns in Warmia located in the Middle Ages, except the capital of the region Olsztyn, can be classified as small urban developments. This group of eleven towns is dominated by the ones whose territorial coverage has not changed considerably since the location and the population ranges from a few thousand to less than twenty thousand. To this day, the historic quarters of these towns have remained the central ones in each town, and their urban structures to a various extent reveal the features characteristic for the period when they were created. The differences are due to the war damage the towns suffered at the end of World War Two and because of the different ways in which they were reconstructed afterwards. In consequence, some elements of the original town master plans have been lost. Revitalisation is an approach whose aim is to improve the quality of space and the ability of inner town areas to function. Revitalisation goes beyond the purely spatial factors, and involves broadly understood economic and social considerations. The conclusions drawn from this research pertain to benefits of using the revitalisation method in planning a sustainable development of urban structures. The development and implementation of revitalisation programmes is a very complex process that takes many years and requires an integrated and interdisciplinary team effort. This method allows us to preserve the identity of historic town areas while enabling them to play functions in the contemporary life of a town.
1. Introduction
The urban structure existing in Warmia, a region situated in north-eastern Poland, has been defined by twelve towns, founded in the Middle Ages and surviving until the present day. All these towns, except the region’s capital city Olsztyn, are classified as small urban centres. Their spatial structure derives from the medieval principles of urban composition, and is a reflection of the policy pursued by the Teutonic Order, which conquered this land in the 13th century. The political and economic goals of the Teutonic Knights explain the military genesis of the towns in Warmia, which were all protected by a castle together with a system of fortified walls and gates, and lay at a distance of 15 to 30 km from one another ‘figure 1’. The specific nature of their growth can be ascribed to similarities between the sites where they were located, as well as similar functions and spatial conditions. To a large extent, this justifies the synthetic character of the subject of this study.

![Figure 1. Towns in the region of Warmia](image)

The small towns of Warmia have distinctly medieval, regular urban structures, based on a checkboard pattern of streets, with compact complexes of buildings on a relatively small area – 6 ha on average. In the centre of a town there was a market place, a square dedicated to commerce, with a town hall standing in the middle. The market square was enclosed by rows of townhouses, built on house lots divided by the grid of streets. One of the corner land parcels at the market place there was occupied by a church, which dominated over all the buildings and represented the sacred space. The house lots were divided into rather narrow strips (for economic reasons), which had bearing on the subsequent development, where the town’s space, undivided into separate areas, was densely packed with residential houses as well as other buildings dedicated to trade and crafts ‘figure 2’. In all the towns of Warmia, in the proximity of those regularly shaped urban structures, the Teutonic Knights raised strongholds and other fortifications, which were intended to keep the towns safe. The compact urban structure, restricted by a hermetic ring of fortified walls, prevented the expansion of a town’s surface area outside of the walls, although – with the passage of time - some buildings were erected outside the town’s fortifications, along roads running from the town.
Figure 2. Reszel – the town’s street plan after a fire in 1806 [1]

The towns analysed below, despite demonstrating certain similarities in terms of their foundation, such as the way they were planned and the epoch in which they were located, are now quite diverse. Differences can be seen in respect of the internal transportation system, the size and proportion of a market square, the location of the town’s most important and largest buildings, such as the parochial church and the local castle, as well as the state of preservation of the town houses. What most often remains the dominant element in the compositional system is the area occupied by the old town.

2. Revalorisation and revitalisation – the underlying conditions
The old centres in historic towns represent the space which in the past centuries was fundamental to their existence and economic development. The old towns were shaped so as to satisfy the expectations and aspirations arising from the life of a given town, and corresponding to the epoch when these towns were founded. There were, and still are, various factors at play which are decisive for the entire spatial order of a town, responding to the changing conditions in different time periods during the town’s history. Complex, mutual relationships between these intricate factors mean by necessity that any analysis of the current state and predicted future development of an urban structure involves multi-layered issues ‘figure 3’.
The contemporary image of the spatial organisation of small towns in Warmia, including their historic, old-town centres, is a reflection of historical transformations, especially the changes enforced by the Second World War. This is reflected by the extent to which historic urban systems, original master plans of towns or the architecture of urban complexes has survived. The ways these towns were raised from the ruins after the last war cannot be said to bring satisfying results. Examples can be found among buildings standing alongside the market squares and in whole centres of the historic towns of Warmia. Alien architecture and even the lack of architectural design are unrelated in any way to the historic paradigms ‘figure 4’. Large parts of the inner town areas in all these towns were spatially deformed. The time when they were redeveloped coincided with the use of architectural means of expression typical for the era of socialism, bringing chaos to the historically defined structure ‘figure 5’. 

Figure 4. Gaps among buildings in the old town: a) Jeziorany – the north side of the market square, b) – the east side of the market square.
The state of preservation of spatial systems in the historic centres of the towns in Warmia calls for restoration efforts. Restoring the capabilities of these central areas to function properly and in association with the historic solutions should meet the following goals: to achieve proper organisation of spatial elements of a whole urban complex, to adjust it to the town’s contemporary needs, and to improve the quality of life of local residents [2]. A town is a living organism, whose structure should be undergoing constant changes. Consequently, development of restoration plans must be preceded by in-depth analyses and identification of the directions for planned actions ‘figure 6’.

Figure 5. Buildings in the old town: a) Dobre Miasto – the west side of the market square, b) Lidzbark Warmiński – the west side of the market square

Figure 6. Analysis of the spatial structure of a town for the sake of developing restoration plans
Renovation of degraded areas is a measure implemented to achieve positive spatial, economic and social solutions. The mutual relationships between these factors mean that revitalisation is a long-term process. The economic and social problems that the towns in Warmia tend to struggle with, e.g. unemployment or migration of young people to larger towns, determine available options for the transformation of space in these towns, especially within their historic centres [3]. In general, actions involved in revitalisation of towns are by no means an easy task in town planning, and this is true about most of the small towns in Warmia, where the urban systems, buildings and functions performed by the old town centres have lost their historic identity ‘figure 7’.

Figure 7. Dobre Miasto – buildings along the north side of the market square:
   a) the inter-war period [4], b) today’s view

3. Revitalisation of old town areas – aims, chances, threats
Ways of the restoration of complexes of historic buildings in towns, irrespective of the method or terminology applied, share certain characteristics [5]. The complexity of factors responsible for the life of a town is implicated as a source of problems arising in this context. This dependence can be observed in the post-war history of most towns in Warmia, manifesting itself in the lack of respect for historical patterns [6]. The main reason was the state’s policy towards the so-called Recovered Territories. The consequences included certain disorder in the urban skeleton of the towns and chaotic architecture within compounds of buildings. In addition to this, we need to remember that any investment activity in historic areas of the regional towns depends on the overall economic situation in Warmia.

The starting point for developing revitalisation programmes is an analysis of the historical facts which are relevant for a given urban centre. The results will allow us to identify the origin of the events held responsible for the contemporary image of the town. The genesis of degradation processes affecting the towns in Warmia, discussed in this paper, should be traced back to the declining years of the Middle Ages (frequent wars, fires, epidemics). Currently, however, the gravest problem in all these towns is the bad economic situation, which causes degradation of social life [7].

Relationships between spatial, economic and social as well as cultural factors justify the claim that revitalisation of the historic centres (old towns) of the towns in Warmia is their only opportunity to develop well. The principal directions in this approach are defined by the following goals:
- improved appeal of the old town central areas against the backdrop of the other town’s areas,
- hierarchy of the space of particular urban areas (the urban system, differentiation of architecture),
- concentration of centre-stimulating functions (commerce, services),
- insurance of accessibility via means of transportation,
- emphasised sense of identity and community among residents,
- improved living standard for local communities.
The above considerations should help identify the 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. It can be extremely difficult to achieve this overall aim in many of the towns in Warmia, where the town centre is either poorly identified or depopulated ‘figure 8’.

![a) b)](image)

Figure 8. Lack of spatial identification of the town’s centre: a) Bisztynek, b) Pieniężno

The best opportunity for successful performance of revitalisation programmes is in these towns where the urban and architectural transformations in the post-war years have not damaged the identification of urban complexes. It is easier to talk about expected results of revitalisation efforts in these towns where there are no adverse economic and social developments, as such events generally lead to the destruction of the technical condition of buildings and therefore undermine the proper functioning of the town centres. Among the towns in Warmia, it is possible to distinguish ones with a development potential and ones where stagnation has negative bearing on the quality of their central areas. The actual situation depends on specific factors, e.g. migration of people to larger towns in search for employment, closing any larger work establishment, which in a small town can prove fatal. Thus, a strong relationship between the economic situation and possible revitalisation activities can be suggested.

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 revalorisation 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 [8].

4. Revitalisation of a former moat in Jeziorany

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 Symasarna River Valley. Until recently, it was an area overgrown with unkempt greenery, stretching around three sides of the old town in Jeziorany (Figure 9). 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 9. The town’s moat in Jeziorany (the red line) – the greenery surrounding the historic old town

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 10’. This is particularly important when a devised plan concerns a space that all town residents identify themselves with.

Figure 10. The development of the former moat in Jeziorany: a) the main walking path, b) the main descent

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 [9]. 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 ‘figure 11’. The whole
composition is made complete by using environment-friendly materials, which in combination with forms of greenery, highlight the building tradition of the region of Warmia.

![Image of urban moat in Jeziorany: a) an amphitheatre, b) the sacred sphere – Stations of the Cross]

**Figure 11.** The urban moat in Jeziorany: a) an amphitheatre, b) the sacred sphere – Stations of the Cross

Revitalisation of the town’s moat in Jeziorany is a positive example of spatial solutions 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 ‘an atmosphere’ of a site (genius loci) in the urban landscape, which in turn strengthens considerably the sense of bonds within the local community.

5. 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 small towns of Warmia, presented in this paper, set up a general framework of the 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.

On the basis of 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-stimulated role of this town’s area. Making a precise specification of these functions is difficult to at the stage of planning as they will be verified by the market,
• 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 centres 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, by employing 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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