

## **Development policy or palliative therapy? Investing in the quality of public spaces in the distance from large urban centers<sup>i</sup>**

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### **Synopsis**

The paper is concerned with two main issues: the phenomenon of an extensive network of medium-sized towns in Poland, and the development of strategies based on the quality of public spaces.

Poland has an extensive network of small and medium-sized towns. This second group - providing access to higher order services - influences the quality of life of a large part of the country's population. The aftermath of system change in 1989 was much more severe for smaller urban centers than for areas of metropolitan potential. The consequences of this transition shock are still evident.

Against this background, a priority for improving the quality of public spaces (this tendency has occurred around 2000 and intensified after the Polish accession to the EU in 2004), seems to be particularly worth verifying. Can the new quality of public space become an important development factor? Is the new image of the town an effective tool for mobilizing potentials or only relieves the symptoms of collapse?

The case studies were made for the four towns (Ustka, Pruszcz Gdanski, Tczew, Chojnice) in which improving the quality of public space was designed to achieve a different development goal. As the point of reference were used selected programs referring to the quality of public space implemented in areas of comparable settlement structure - Germany and Denmark.

The results show that under certain conditions the answer to the above questions can be positive. Furthermore, better results were achieved in those cases, in which the main investments in the public spaces have carried out without use of the EU funds.

### **1. The situation of small and medium-sized towns in the context of political changes in Poland**

The Polish settlement network is characterized by high density of towns in the absence of global nodes and European engines (ESPON 2006). More than a dozen largest urban centers by far excel in contributing to the country's economic growth but it is in the space of small and medium-sized towns where a large part of the population resides. Thus, the smaller towns and connected rural areas significantly influence the direction of local development and, owing to their large number, they become an important component of regional growth.

Studies conducted in various parts of the country confirm that the small and medium-sized towns whose economies would be shaped in the past by a single employer or a single branch of industry suffered the effects of the transformations started in 1989 more severely than the larger multi-functional centers. It should be noted that in the period of socialism (particularly in the 60s and 70s), under the influence of the so-called "socialization of the economy", smaller urban centers were subjected to deep transformations of the traditional economic structures, socio-economic connections and forms of developing and using urban spaces (Heffner 2008).

Against the background of the common world trend of moving from the industrial to post-industrial identities, the case of Poland of the 90s was distinguished by the superimposition of the economic crisis on the administrative and organizational crisis: what was once a common state resource was divided into the state and municipal ownerships, which made it so much more difficult to formulate common strategies for the development of urban space.

A significant proportion of state-owned enterprises developed in or on the land of former nineteenth century factories – they were built on the then outskirts of towns, usually near the railway station. At the time of the collapse of industry in the late twentieth century, properties excluded from industrial production were already part of the downtown area. Liquidation of large enterprises was particularly difficult for local communities because such companies would often maintain also cultural and sport centers as well as educational units.

Post-military towns – bases of the Soviet Army (towards the end Army of the Russian Federation) or bases of national armies of the Warsaw Pact, closed down or adapted for civil use in the first half of the 90s – were urban structures characteristic for Central and Eastern Europe (Jarczewski & Kuryło 2009).

The spatial gaps described above needed filling for reasons related not only to urban planning but also to socio-economic factors – the post-industrial/post-military towns needed to acquire new functions that would provide property tax revenues to the towns and employment to the inhabitants. In the case of small and medium-sized the task turned out rather difficult inasmuch the centers were not significantly more attractive than the outskirts, so private capital was not interested in costly and procedurally difficult investment projects on brownfields areas.

Considering today's settlement processes, we are witnessing depopulation of urban spaces and the smallest towns with increasing population density of large and medium-sized towns and their immediate vicinity<sup>ii</sup> (Ministry of Regional Development 2011). Regardless of the present migration, most of the Polish population remains outside major centers.

Sustainable development of the country's polycentric settlement network was to be supported by the territorial reform of 1999. Within the reform, self-governing voivodships (regions) and intermediate-level poviats (counties) were created in addition to the existing communes.

Thanks to these changes, foundations were to be laid for the "*conditions for the reconstruction of local ties and restoration of the role of small and medium-sized towns as active centers of community life with a view to modeling regional development*" (Kulesza 2000). The established network of provincial capitals was a compromise between scientific concepts and aspirations of local communities and as such its effectiveness is subject to criticism. Current research (Guzik 2011) has shown that due to the actual role they play for the surrounding area, some poviat capitals fail to serve their functions, while other areas lack a clear poviat center.

The group of poviat towns is very diverse in terms of population. In most voivodships the populations of the smallest poviat capitals oscillate around 10,000 while in the largest ones they do not exceed 100,000. In less urbanized voivodships, there are also poviat capitals just over 5,000 inhabitants. The largest group of poviat centers is made up of poviat centers within the range of 10,000-20,000 inhabitants.

## **2. A new role and quality of public space in the contemporary formal and legal environment**

In new social and economic conditions, many medium-sized towns try to redefine their role and place in regional space structures, looking for new development impulses and opportunities to improve life conditions of local communities and strengthen their role of translocal or sub-regional centers of progress.

One of the elements of creating new development strategies is evaluating the potential in urban areas. After 45 years of centrally planned economy and sudden shift to local governing and free market economy, in the 90s living space for town citizens was degenerated not only in terms of technical and compositional aspects but also morally. Post-war reconstruction and development often came in the form of prefabricated large panels block of flats, which stood in opposition to the scale and structure of town centers (Gzell 1996). Devoid of proper restoration works, historically shaped areas were gradually appropriated by other functions, mostly by communication and trade. The notion of common good was disgraced by overuse in nomenclature and rhetoric of the then authorities.

According to Marszał & Kozłowski (2009), achievement of translocal functions of development centers is possible by means of actions aimed at three target groups:

- Improved competitiveness of the economic base and development of stable work places
- Improved quality of the municipal space (not only in the physical but also social dimension)
- Development of human capital in the area.

The increased role of the physical quality of urban space in the shaping of competitive image as in opposition to the scale of the center is indicated by Markowski (2006). In his opinion, in case of smaller towns, a key role is played by the physical attributes of their urban space and not such features as innovations or knowledge-based economy.

Medium-sized towns' investment policies seem to confirm the above statements concerning the quality of urban tissue. Engagement of efforts and means in reconstruction or construction of central squares and parks as well as other recreational areas are notable here.

The phenomenon of interest in the public space quality in medium-sized towns is quite surprising as it takes place in conditions of degradation of spatial development in legal and organizational realities.

Implementation of the regulations of the free market economy and decentralization of the administrative system was accompanied by, de facto, deconstruction of the spatial development system. The constitutional primacy of ownership rights results in poor protection of public interest in the act on spatial development and planning as well as related regulations (Jędraszko 2005). In effect, shared areas are taken possession of and settlement development is uncontrolled and characterized by low service quality and deurbanization of town centers.

The situation pertaining to the crisis management of town areas does not look any better. Despite works initiated in the 70s, Poland still lacks an act on revitalization. Local authorities form local revitalization programs on non-compulsory standards. The first wave of such documents took place in the mid-90s and was stimulated by the development of partnership relations with towns from Western parts of Europe and transfer of good practice on the spatial policy. The programs were executed from own means of towns in cooperation with housing cooperatives, and among the pioneers the majority was composed of medium-sized towns. The second wave of revitalization works was triggered around 2004 and was connected with requirements of the European Union pertaining to financing of complex revitalization enterprises. Those documents were often modified after 2007, in consequence of new EU programming and new guidelines. The fact confirms a lack of any (even informal one) national policy of towns' revitalization - the Polish model remains dependent on financing within the Cohesion Policy and the key decisions are reached on the European, regional<sup>iii</sup> and local levels. Because of formal issues, the executed projects did not include public-private partnership. This option has been introduced gradually in new regions since 2009 (presently it is available in five regions) within projects executed with support of the JESSICA initiative<sup>iv</sup>.

Passivity of central authorities come on top of poor urban development legislation when it comes to pilot programs or other forms of promoting good practices in spatial development.

In the light of the above, it is surprising that medium-sized towns, devoid of private capital and matter-of-content umbrella of the state, invest their own funds in upgrading the quality of public space. This policy is also present in regional and nationwide contests for the best public spatial development.

### 3. Case studies

Medium-sized towns constitute a very versatile collection. Better quality of public space may contribute to different strategic development aims which are illustrated by the selected case studies: post-industrial tourist area, new town center structures (increasing competitiveness of towns in relation to vast areas of suburbanization), sub-regional centers inflicted with deurbanization and a shaping sub-regional center.

The cases have been selected on the basis of a cross-sectional analysis was carried out for 22 medium-sized towns<sup>v</sup> of socially and economically diverse Pomorskie Voivodeship (Golędzinowska 2013).

Name	Population <sup>vi</sup>		Change in the period 1995-2012		Status of poviat capital	Development goal related to quality of public spaces
	1995	2012	Units	Percentage		
<b>Ustka</b>	17213	16379	-834	-5,09%	-	Popular holiday resort
<b>Pruszcz Gdański</b>	21318	28621	7303	25,52%	+	Residential area with a distinct identity
<b>Tczew</b>	60615	60769	154	0,25%	+	Sustaining a competitive sub-regional centre
<b>Chojnice</b>	39872	40306	434	1,08%	+	Shaping a competitive sub-regional centre

Fig. 1. Profile of selected towns

#### 3.1. Ustka

Ustka is a small coastal town affected by major development constraints. The fall of large enterprises engaged in the maritime industry (mainly boatbuilding, fishing and fish processing) resulted in problems of social, economic as well as spatial nature. The town boasts spa traditions reaching back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century but in the times of the so-called real-socialism, the quality of this function deteriorated considerably.

An important development factor is the proximity of Słupsk with a population of nearly 100,000. The residents of Ustka are thus provided with access to higher-end services. The residents of Słupsk, in turn, treat Ustka as their leisure center. The ongoing urbanization between Słupsk and Ustka (Rydz, Jażewicz 2005) and the concept adopted by the two towns' authorities to have a "bi-city" developed may cause that Ustka's space will increasingly serve the residents of Słupsk for recreation purposes and as an attractive place to live.

The town has its historical center, the district of Ustka Stara, formed on a plan of a regular orthogonal grid. Until recently the streets of Ustka were dominated by traffic. The town shows the highest population density and it suffers from high unemployment (Jażewicz 2007). Given the age of the urban development and limited financial means of the town's residents and

authorities, there is a serious renovation inadequacy in the area of Stara Ustka. Most of the historical district is situated in an intermediary spa zone – with the exception of the vicinity of the spa facilities in the eastern part of the town covered by a program of strict protection.

Ustka's port, the chief urban interior emerging on both sides of the river Słupia, is burdened with issues of a different nature. In effect of the above-mentioned collapse of maritime industries, vast areas of the ports turned into unused land. The smaller, eastern part of the port is adjacent to the historical center and it is more favorably situated in the intermediary spa zone. Thanks to its convenient accessibility and neighborhood of popular tourist destinations, the area quickly gained new functions. Conversely, the western part neighbors the extensively developed district of Ustka Rozwojowa (Eng. developing Ustka) and woodland – it is situated in the third, least rigorously protected spa zone. Weak transport connections with the eastern part of the town constitute a serious barrier to the zone's development.

In the 1990s, the local authorities ambitiously approached the subject of shaping the spatial development policy, despite its small scale. In 1995, a team of experts in environmental protection, economics, spatial development, transport and logistics engineering were commissioned to draw up *The Strategic Eco-Development Program for Ustka* (Gerstmann et. al.). In effect of their work, the team developed a comprehensive detailed document that indicated directions of changes consistent with the paradigm of sustainable development. According to the document, the priorities of the town's policy were, among others, development of the town's tourist functions, development of the port and improvement of the quality of the residential function. The program was adopted by the town council in 1996. However, due to strong restriction of a financial nature, few of those plans were actually implemented.

In 2001, the self-government of the newly created Pomorskie Voivodship incorporated the development of the Fish Auction into the operating program for the years 2001-2002. The role of the auction developed in the western part of the port was to rescue the fishing sector and, indirectly, also to strengthen the translocal role of Ustka. In view of the strong dependence on external factors such as the catch quota imposed by the European Commission, ever since its launch in 2004 the auction has been coping with financial problems and has had but a small impact on the environment (Czapliński 2012).

Along with Poland's accession of the European Union and accessibility of programs co-financing selected development projects, the town undertook to implement a number of modernization projects, narrowing a little the scope of the targets set out in *The Strategic Eco-Development Program*.

The Local Revitalization Program for Ustka Commune adopted in 2005 provided for the district of Ustka Stara. One of its priorities was to stop the decline of tourism (Bugajewska & Warsińska 2009).

The first phase in the implementation of the revitalization program concerned the former fishing settlement. The activities included, above all, modernization of traffic infrastructure, improvement of the quality of green areas and preservation of the typical half-timbered buildings. Most of the work concerning the arrangement of streets and parks was carried out with the use of funds from the Integrated Regional Operational Program 2004-2006. The reconstruction and conversion of the district's main traffic line into a promenade was supported with funds from the "Lithuania, Poland and Kaliningrad Region of Russian Federation Neighborhood Program". In order to preserve the region's landscape with its typical huts, activities were undertaken that were perceived as innovative but also controversial in the Polish conditions. Those efforts have been continued since 2004, funded exclusively from the commune's budget. Because of a very bad condition of the huts, in the majority of cases inventories are made and the huts are demolished and reconstructed. As part of the communal resources, the buildings are put up on sale in open tenders. This way

the commune obtains funds for new projects. The residents of the buildings are transferred to public housing projects in other parts of the town.

Given the selected (revised) goal - halting the decline in tourism – the town's investment policy aimed at improving aesthetics and comfort of using areas with a tourist potential turned out to be a successful form of intervention. Nevertheless, there are still challenges to be faced, like those connected with the development of the western port area and the seasonal changeability of the historical center under the process of gentrification.



*Fig. 2. Reconstructed huts of Ustka Stara*  
*Fig. 3. New waterfront at east side of former port area.*

### **3.2. Pruszcz Gdański**

Unlike the case described above, Pruszcz Gdański is on the path of fast development attributed chiefly to its excellent location in relation to the large harbor of Gdańsk and the transportation routes connecting the town with the center of the country – roads number 6 and 1, exits from A1 highway and the railway network. The competitiveness of the town is improved also by the presence of large areas available for development – including the post-military areas in the central part of the town.

Similarly, investments in public spaces turned out to an important element to the town's development strategy. However, this time it was all about averting a crisis situation.

One shortcoming of the functional-spatial structure of the town was lack of a historically formed public space focusing the life of the local community. There were some remains of a rural square along the present national road and a square in the center of a socialist realist project performing administrative functions but those spaces were used chiefly as passageways for cars and pedestrians and as such were devoid of human interactions that are typical for a properly functioning public space.

After the decentralization of the system of spatial planning that took place in the early 90s, thanks to the aforementioned spatial properties the town with the adjacent rural areas became a strong pole of suburbanization. Migration involved both residents and business entities. In view of the lack of space integrating the community, there was a risk of the town being perceived as a spatial extension to the new residential district void of a clear identity – Gdańsk Południe.

The *Development Strategy of Pruszcz Gdański Up Until 2010* placed strong emphasis on population growth – it envisaged a population of as many as 25,000 inhabiting the town in 2010, while the 2007 population already was 25,143 (Local Data Bank 2013). In order to make the town's residential offer more attractive in relation to the offers of other communes neighboring the agglomeration of Gdańsk, the document spoke also about the necessity to develop areas for leisure and integration, including the necessity to complete the work over a new center, for which first preparations had already been made.

In the post-military areas a system of crossing pedestrian routes and adjacent service-residential quarters were designed. The location of the land along the axis of a socialist

realist complex, national road no 1, the river Radunia, the town's Sport and Leisure Center and a park predestinated the area for this kind of spatial development. The town authorities decided to organize a competition for the architectural and urban concept. One of the partners in organizing the competition for the project was the Polish Association of Architects, which was to ensure a high quality of entries. This method of work made it possible to work out a very detailed spatial development plan, providing for the organization of public space. Public spaces named in the document were to be developed by the town, while the surrounding quarters were to be developed through private initiative.

First buildings were carried out on single plots of land, with a view to creating consistent quarters in the future. However, there was difficulty coordinating the particular activities of the investors and eventually the decision was made to put up whole quarters on sale (Pancewicz 2009). The development of the public space itself followed the development of the quarters. The basic phase was completed in 2007 and in 2012 the center and the town park were successfully connected within one axis. The projects were carried out without support from the EU, but the town used such funds when carrying out purely tourist or recreational projects such as the development of the theme park "Faktoria Rzymska" ("Roman trading post") and walking and bicycle routes within the so-called Amber Route.



*Fig. 4-5. New town center in Pruszcz Gdański.*

### **3.3. Tczew**

As a result of the restructuring of the Polish State Railways (PKP), which was the largest employer in the region, at the beginning of the 90s the town found itself in a crisis situation. With many people self-employed in services and small-scale trade and with the location of a special economic zone, the problem of unemployment was significantly alleviated but the new business entities were chiefly located in the western and northern parts of the town, separated from the historical center by railway lines. Apart from the external factors contributing to the fall of the Old Town, we should mention also the major problem in the poor technical condition of public spaces and the surrounding historical buildings.

In the mid-90s, the local authorities undertook measures to increase the attractiveness of the center and to avert the ongoing deurbanization while changing the image of the town, from that of a railway town to that situated on the river Vistula. The aim of the first works (1995-1997) was to improve the technical condition and safety of squares and streets – in particular for pedestrians. In terms of the search for a function of the district that would make it attractive in relation to the retail and service centers located in other parts of the town, we should point to the town's efforts to develop cultural and recreational functions. In the years 1997-2002, the Tczew Cultural Center was modernized, and the years 2006-2007 brought the modernization of the Museum of the Vistula River and establishment of an institution vested with the role of representing the cultural heritage of the town and the surrounding area of Kociewie - in an attractive way, in accord with the modern requirements.

The cultural infrastructure was strengthened especially in the historical area of the Old Town. The open spaces around it were adapted for the recreation of residents and potential tourists. In 1999, the modernization of the Town Park established in 1998 started. In 2003,

work began to create a new public space that would serve as an extension of the public space in the center toward the river – the Vistula Boulevard.

The Local Revitalization Program adopted in 2004 provided for continuation of the policy of improving the attractiveness of the historical center. The current revitalization program is pursued within the Regional Operational Program of Pomorskie Voivodship for years 2007-2013, providing for upgrade of certain public spaces, location of business-support institutions as well as improving the quality of the residential resources.

The program hasn't been completed yet and it difficult now to assess its effects. The previous activity resulted in considerable growth of the Old Town, especially the boulevard as the place of the local community's recreation and integration. However, investors did not show any significantly larger interest in this area.



*Fig. 6. Vistula Boulevard*  
*Fig. 7. Museum of the Vistula River*

### **3.4. Chojnice**

The town of Chojnice is situated approximately 90 km from the closest large urban center. The extensive wood and metal industries after the privatization survived the economic transformation – a remarkable fact, bearing in mind that the town of Człuchów, situated just 14 km away, was indicated in the late 90s as Poland's unemployment pole.

The authorities of the town decided to take advantage of its relatively good economic situation and build its position as a service center of sub-regional significance – the new image of the town was to be an essential element of this strategy (Finster, 2009).

Within the works carried out in years 2001-2002, the aesthetics of the center's historical space was changed and revamped: the discordant architectural elements were either removed or modified and the functional layout was adjusted, limiting traffic and improving the comfort for pedestrians and cyclists. The most important and most spectacular part of the task was the reconstruction of the façade of a multi-family residential block occupying about 90 per cent of the southern frontage of the Old Market Square. Public spaces and the façades of public buildings were modernized with the use of municipal funds, while private owners were offered incentives in the form of free façade modernization designs and subsidies for renovation works.

The activities presented above are often referred to in the literature of the subject as "revitalization", but they were actually implemented without any revitalization plan in force. A relevant program was adopted as late as in 2004, within preparations for absorption of EU funds. Further projects related to the renovation of the most typical elements of the landscape were carried out mostly with subsidies from the EU cohesion fund – nevertheless, only one of them was carried out as a "comprehensive revitalization project" – the conversion of the former hospital into an educational center (media library and the seat of cultural and social societies) (2005-2007). Other projects were co-financed with funds provided to increase the attractiveness of tourism – for example, repair of the minor basilica or adaptation of a post-Jesuit complex for cultural purposes.

The rank of Chojnice's service functions located in the historical center may serve as evidence for the success of the town's image policy. What is more, after the modernization of the center the town attracts much more attention – in both research studies and in the mass media.



Fig. 8. The Old Market Square before renewal (source: Municipality of Chojnice).

Fig. 9. The Old Market Square current state.

#### 4. Experience of western neighbors

In order to assess the purposefulness of the Polish towns' public space policies, it is worth referring to other areas of the European Union with similar settlement characteristics and climate conditions but different planning systems and development priorities – Denmark and Eastern Germany.

Following the German reunification in 1990, the town centers were affected by rapid depopulation. The reasons for this situation are found in a mass migration to the western part of the country and also, like in Poland, in migration of many families from downtown to suburban areas. To alleviate the crisis, the system of comprehensive renovation of degraded urban districts, started in Western Germany already in the 70s, was now to be applied also in the east of the country. The quality of public spaces is understood there as an evident feature of a well-run spatial policy.

The federal government and the governments of the constituent states have invested a lot of effort and huge sums of money in improving the quality of life in the eastern part of the country. In 1999, the federal government initiated *Soziale Stadt*, which was aimed at a comprehensive renovation of centers in eastern German towns. The program provided for improving infrastructure and boosting social and economic development. In 2001, *Stadtumbau Ost* was initiated, a program providing for scheduled demolitions of abandoned buildings and adaptation of land for social purposes (Bryx & Jadach-Sepiało 2009).

From the point of view of the town's competitiveness, it turned out to be a failure – the programs did not constrain the rapid shrinking of towns. In a small number of them, the process was stopped or restricted considerably – the development of new services and production played the key role here. However, the assessment of the phenomenon changes after we take into account the basis of the German state – the constitution that requires the residents are ensured decent living conditions regardless of where they live.

One important element of the German spatial policy is knowledge transfer and continuous improvement. The above mentioned programs are accompanied by extensive analyses and publications presenting their results. Periodical international construction fairs (*Internationale Bauausstellung*) support the introduction of innovations in spatial planning and the construction sector. In the context of strategies for transforming public spaces in medium-sized towns, the Building Exhibition Urban Redevelopment Saxony-Anhalt organized in 2010 is notable. The project covered 19 shrinking towns of this relatively sparsely populated state. The largest two towns each had about 230 thousand inhabitants, with the following towns in the 90-2.5 thousand range. In each town a different set topic was pursued, including renovation of a historical center of a unique cultural value, landscape adaptation of transformed areas or creation of a family-friendly town.

Denmark is a country of small and medium-sized towns in which the transformations of urban space are different in nature. The spatial planning system has been placed within the program of environmental protection in a broad sense of the term. Popularity of public spaces in this country comes from both the routine of active life (moving by bicycle, on foot) and from their architectural quality ensured by the local authorities, who understand the significance of this feature of urban space for the local communities<sup>vii</sup>. The content and walkability of Danish towns is determined also by restrictive provisions of relevant national regulations.

Under the Danish planning act, the commune's strategy 'shall contain the municipal council's political objectives for the future work within reducing the negative effects of human activity on the environment and promoting sustainable urban development and urban regeneration.' Strategic planning at both local and regional levels must comply with the provisions of Local Agenda 21.

The act provides a number of tools protecting the traditional vitality of public spaces – e.g. by maintaining compact settlements (strict limitations of urban sprawl), locating trade in town centers, regulating the maximum size of retail space – in case of small towns this regulation is much more strict.

It also provides individual provisions for different regions - depending on the degree of risk of various phenomena. In case of the Greater Copenhagen area, the development of compact centers shaped in correlation with the public transport system (in particular the urban train) is strongly promoted. The Ministry of Environment, basing on a statistical method, conditions the possible location of workplaces on the availability of walking to the train station.

Like in eastern Germany, in 1996 the national authorities launched implementation of a program of comprehensive revitalization of degenerated urban districts called *Kvarterloeft*. The program has been financed mostly from central and municipal budgets. However, private stakeholders were also involved (Munk 2007).

Its main purpose was social inclusion, provision of decent housing and crime prevention but transformation of public space was a popular tool for the implementation of the program – e.g. Aalborg East, Vollsmose.

As in the case of the projects in Germany, an important part of *Kvarterloeft* was its constant evaluation and modification to fit the diagnosed needs but there was also an image element – in order to have inhabitants identify with the changes taking place around them (Tverskov 2007).

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

An important element contributing to the success of the case studies describing medium-sized towns is their pioneering nature. This is especially true of Pruszcz Gdański and Chojnice, where the town authorities started modernization at the break of the 20th century without access to any external funds. We can attribute it to the social need for beauty in the urban space after years of the robust conditions of the centrally planned economy. The first activities were focused primarily on improving the competitiveness of the town against the background of the rural or amorphous suburban areas – as a place of residence, a tourist or service center. The matter of local community building seemed to be secondary. At present, however, it is necessary to re-evaluate such development strategies.

In the period of availability of the highest EU subsidies so far (2007-2013), many medium-sized towns were encouraged by the successes of their predecessors and the ease with which funds could be obtained and undertook activities aimed at improving the quality of public spaces. Among them, there were well thought-out projects as well as quite accidental ones – mindlessly copying solutions successfully completed in different conditions.

Considering the fact that the projects were carried out with little organizational and intellectual support from the central authorities, the experience of the Polish local centers in planning development by upgrading public spaces should be appraised favorably. Nevertheless, in the context of departing from EU subsidies replaced with repayable funds, the expected smaller access to funds after 2020 and economic issues that medium-sized towns still cope with, it seems necessary to draw up a support system at the national level.

The first general and overarching issue is to strengthen the role of the state in spatial planning. Recently, planning was moved from the competences of the Ministry of Infrastructure, criticized for inefficiency, to the competences of the Ministry of Regional Development, which now stimulates Poland's largest spatial transformations thanks to granted subsidies. In terms of the organization of the work, it seems a step in the right direction. However, thus far it has not resulted in any significant legislative changes.

In the context of the *Europe 2020* strategy, for which inclusive growth and settlement network issues are some of the chief concerns, it seems necessary to develop a legal framework that would trigger a comprehensive renovation of public spaces and surrounding housing resources. As in the case of the depicted Western experience, the state should be involved in this process financially and organizationally, breaking free from the dependence on EU funds granted subject to principles changing every seven years. The field where it is worth drawing on Western practices concerns the shaping of intellectual resources of programs aimed at upgrading urban spaces and image-improving efforts helping residents to better identify with the changes in progress.

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<sup>ii</sup> In some cases the town is depopulating, however the considering the suburban communes, the area in total is growing.

<sup>iii</sup> The voivodeships (regions) are the key stakeholders in implementation of the EU regional policy.

<sup>iv</sup> Joint European Support for Sustainable Investment In City Areas.

<sup>v</sup> For the purpose of this research, "medium-sized towns" are understood as those with populations between 10,000 and 100,000, in accordance with the term as it is defined in the National Spatial

Development Plan of 2005. This rather broad term includes also, with regard to their functions, also smaller towns that are the capitals of powiat districts.

<sup>vi</sup> Based on the Local Data Bank; before 1995 a different statistical method was applied.

<sup>vii</sup> A huge role in promoting awareness in this area has contributed the publication of Jan Gehl's "Life between buildings: Using Public Space" – first edition in issued in 1971.