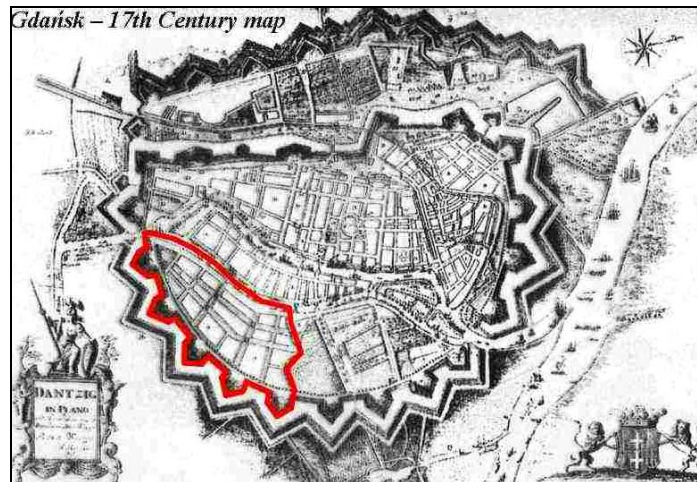


Rejoining the Gdansk innercity

History

The core of the Gdańsk innercity, presently protected as the historical monument under the Republic of Poland President's order, has taken its shape in the XVIIth century when independent parts of the post-medieval city were joined together by closing them within the continuous system of fortifications. The last remnants of this system including bastions of the earthwork ramparts with the moat, the Lowland Gate and the most unique structure – the Stone Lock serving as the floodgate – still surround the Lower Town (Dolne Miasto) from the south. This south-eastern part of the innercity took its name from the location on the Żuławy lowland – the flat plain (partially beneath the sea level) within the delta of Vistula river.



Peter Willer 1687, from the collection of PAN Library in Gdańsk

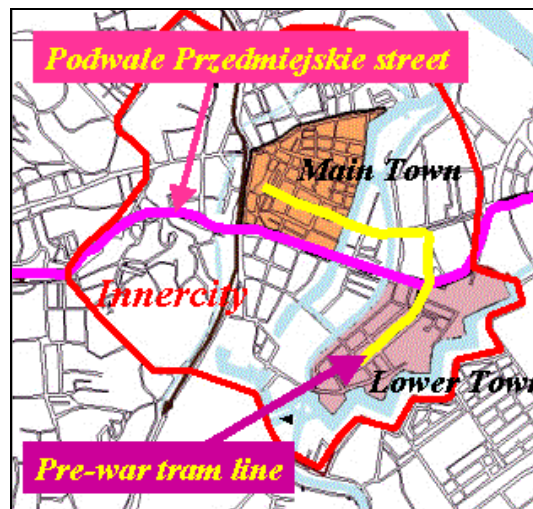
The regular streets grid of the Lower Town was formed on dykes of the draining canals making habitable this marshy area between the arms of Motława river. Initially the residential district it started to change in the XIXth century when some of its quarters were adapted for military functions (among them the Rifle Factory). Some important public facilities (hospital, schools, public bath) were also added and the workers' houses (known as Abegg's Foundation) were built in its southern part. Most of canals were filled and double rows of trees planted on their place. Already in 70-ties of this century the district got the direct connection with the Main Town through the line of – firstly horse-drawn and later electrified – tram with its depot at the end of Łąkowa St. From the beginning of the XXth century the district started to change into a wealthy bourgeoisie neighbourhood with rare in Gdansk, interesting architectural examples of the eclectic style. In the 20-ties the modernist building of Tobacco Factory was constructed following curved shape of Łąkowa St.



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Disintegration process

The area of Gdańsk innercity had been developing as a whole until the last days of the II World War – the German urban plans of 1930 and 1941 had shown it as the consistent, outstanding area surrounded by newer structures. During the Red Army siege its most attractive parts – the Main Town and the Old Town - were ruined almost to the ground. The urban fabric of the Lower Town was left almost intact, but it proved not much positive fact for the district. During the post-war rebuilding phase the majority of available resources have been directed to raising from ruins the more valuable historical parts of the innercity while the Lower Town with its technically outworn XIXth century buildings was left for 50 years without upgrading. The less attractive but still centrally situated and easily accessible area (e.g. by the tram line) it was inhabited mainly by workers employed in the maritime economy.



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The decisive moment of the Gdansk historical innercity physical disintegration came in 80-ties of XXth century when the 6-lanes highway (Podwale Przedmiejskie St.) with the tram tracks in the middle was constructed between the Main and Lower Towns. Later on the tram line connecting the Lower Town with other parts of the innercity was also cancelled and the tram depot was no more needed. Presently Podwale Przedmiejskie St. serves as the transit road between outer ring highway in the west and the Northern Port (within the city) and the exit from Gdańsk towards the east (e.g. to Warsaw). It is one of the most busy roads in Gdańsk with more than 20 000 vehicles in one direction daily (14% of heavy trucks) and two tram lines. Within the fragment adjacent to the Lower Town it can be crossed through only one pedestrian underground pass.

Quickly after the innercity division Poland became its period of the post-totalitarian transition which has confronted its society with new problems. Opening the country to free market forces paradoxically has accelerated social and economical degradation of the Lower Town. The quick changes have brought about the polarisation within the Polish society – some groups have found their chance of development in the process of transformation but others have not coped well with the market economy and those have been groups prevailing on the area.

In the rather homogeneously inhabited district the suddenly decreased possibilities of so far employment caused growing poverty and created conditions for social exclusion leading to the criminal behaviour. The financial means of poverty-stricken inhabitants did not allow them neither to change the place of living nor to upgrade the technically worn flats and buildings. Bad maintenance of the drainage caused temporary flooding in the basements. Despite the vicinity of the Main Town, frequently visited by a lot of people, the highly attractive, recently restored old fortifications and some interesting examples

of XIXth century buildings the Lower Town has got an opinion of the “bad district” for the developers and has been dangerous for tourists.

Towards reintegration

There are many reasons for changing the present state. The Main Town, serving currently as a city’s cultural centre, has too much conservation limitations for growing needs of a “vital city”. The new public spaces should be easily accessible and the Lower Town has got potential for their continuation. The work on the fortifications restoration seems futile if they are not known to many people and their vast green areas significantly improve the bad ratio of greenery within the innercity. The Lower Town’s historical monuments supplement the most known attractions of the Main and Old Towns with elements of the different age and character. Rejoining the innercity would give then the new development impulse for this whole part of the city threatened with losing its dominating position.

The elimination of the physical barrier between the Lower Town and other parts of the innercity demands the general improvement of the whole area accessibility. The future transportation scheme includes the proposal of creating the central ring around the historical area together with moving the transit of heavy trucks from Podwale Przedmiejskie St. to new roads in the southern part of the city. This would allow to decrease the intensity of traffic on the present highway and to change it for a moderately used city street. The implementation of these plans, however, will take much time and means, while the degradation of the Lower Town must be stopped quickly in order to avoid its further deterioration.

In April 2004 Gdańsk City Council passed the Local Programme of Revitalisation which pointed at the Lower Town as its first target because its historical value and place within the urban structure of the city. The detailed programme for the area comprises activities in social and built environment aimed at counteracting the ongoing processes and upgrading its economic vitality.

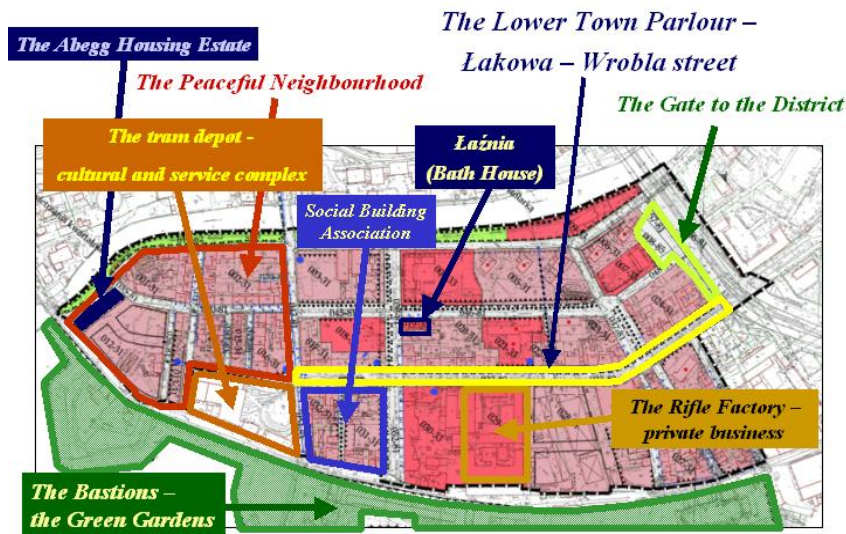
The district presents currently three main social problems, characteristic for central parts in the most of Polish cities: the unemployment almost twice higher than in another parts of the city, the lack of identity and local community ties and the level of crime eliminating the advantage of the area tourist assets. All of them are mutually dependent and increased by the low standard of housing, lack of good quality services and presence of derelict or burdensome enterprises in substandard structures.

The unemployment must be addressed through different ways of adaptation to the changing labour market in order to strengthen the economic power of inhabitants and to improve their living conditions. The existing, already unused structures give chances for developing new, jobs providing enterprises like business incubators, retail trade, small workshops or cultural facilities.

The activation of the local community, strengthening the neighbourhood and cultural ties, special care for children from threatened families should eliminate the feeling of social exclusion and the danger of crime. As the beginning the Contemporary Art Centre “Łaźnia” was opened in the building of the old public baths, providing a place both for art and for educational purposes of the society from children to elderly people. Since its beginning in 1997 it has been a place for tens of exhibitions (one of them „The Eye of the Lower Town” was prepared with the participation of inhabitants), different series of artistic events (e.g. In progress – the meetings with the best composers of experimental music or Parakino – artistic films projections with public discussions), lectures and workshops for young people promoting the revitalisation of the district. In the campaign called “Outer Gallery” the artistic works are taken out of the building into the district territory.

The built environment must prepare space for the success of above mentioned activities. The recently passed spatial development plan for the Lower Town, elaborated in the Gdańsk Development Office aims at keeping the historical character of the area together with providing space for new functions.

The Functional Principles for the Lower Town



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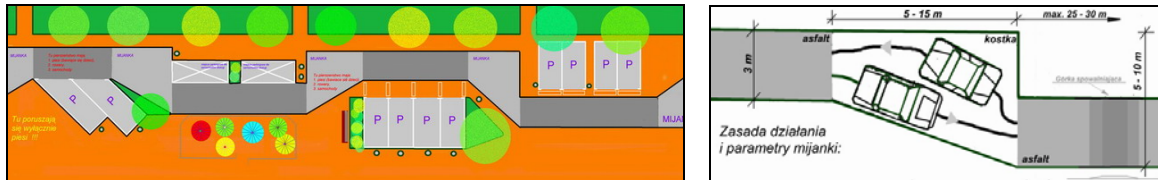
The general outline of the district urban pattern basing on the existing street blocks will remain. Public and neighbourhood spaces inside the building blocks will be upgraded by removing the marring structures and providing the car-parking and green spaces. Because of the high level of ground water, which does not allow underground parking lots, the proposed solution provides for arranging them on the ground level and covering them with the green roof serving as the recreational space. Thus the flats will not be possible on the first floors of many buildings leaving space for commercial purposes. Commercial activities, however, will be allowed only on the first and second floors while on the next ones (generally two) the residential function must be kept in order to avoid the “dead” innercity. The exception can be done only for buildings changed for hotels.

The new residential quarters are expected in some in-fill places and on the post-industrial areas where the arrangement of buildings and streets should follow the historical pattern. In those locations the conditions are created also for the establishment of service network both for inhabitants and for tourists. The special attention will be paid to the area adjoining Podwale Przedmiejskie St. where “a gate” to the Lower Town should be created. The restored old fortifications will provide the district with the vast green water front and a recreation place. All these proposals aim at attracting developers for setting their businesses in the district.

Perspectives

The above described actions of “Łaźnia” Centre and the fortifications restoration have been the first but not only processes aiming on the revival of the Lower Town.

First of all the modernisation of the old technical infrastructure is necessary. The reconstruction of the drainage system and renovation of the main district street (Łąkowa/Wróbla) has been just prepared. This project comprises replacement of the old drainage and sewer mains together with adding other underground systems, completion of the existing rows of trees, changing the pavement and resignation of one of the existing traffic lanes in order to construct there the common pedestrian-bicycle-car parking space (modelled on the Woonerf system). The street thus should become the safe, friendly meeting place for inhabitants and tourists, which would encourage foundation of small businesses and change in the life style



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.The works are also going on the renovation of the Motława river embankment which should provide the place for water sports (e.g. the small boats harbour) and cultural activities as well as the direct connection with the rest of the innercity. This connection will be strengthened after the realisation of 3 artistic projects which have won the international competition for the Outer Gallery.



Website of CSW LAZNIA (www.laznia.pl)

The recent practice in other parts of Gdansk shows that it is relatively easier to overcome physical barriers for development as the costs and procedures of such operations are foreseeable. Social and mental barriers, having their roots in the previous socio-economic system, are much more difficult to break and neither their costs nor the time period for their overcoming are easy to determine. There is also lack of the solid legal ground for such actions – e.g. the Act on renovation/revitalisation areas has been remaining in parliamentary debates since a dozen or so years and the Act on public-private partnership has been only recently passed (despite a lot of critics). The patterns from “old” European countries loose their usefulness in the reality of the “new” countries where the low level of tenants income open to doubts the effectiveness of programs assuming their financial contribution in the costs of housing renovation. Finally there is very scarce number of managers with the proper social skills for the needed work. It is why, although the city has started the process of the Lower Town revitalisation with its own means, the help from the EU structural funds will be necessary.

The process of innercity reintegration based on the revitalisation of the Lower Town will take many years. The Polish experience so far shows that its intensity will fluctuate according to the commitment of authorities and citizens. All efforts should be undertaken for keeping the Lower Town on the agenda in order to regain the historical shape and strengthen the central function of the Gdańsk innercity.

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