
REVIEW ARTICLES AND REPORTS

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**REVITALISATION OF POTSDAM'S CENTRAL AREA:
REGAINING THE IDENTITY OF THE CITY**

After 1990 it became possible for the towns of the eastern states of Germany to undertake activities aimed at regaining their identity and to obtain financial support for these projects from the federal government and the EU. It also became possible to take advantage of experienced West German firms, specialised in the field of urban regeneration and revitalisation of degraded urban areas.

The case of Potsdam shows how urban revitalisation programme for a city's central area, intentionally destroyed during several decades of the communist regime after the Second World War, can become an effective instrument in the process of reclaiming the city's identity through restoration of the historical spatial and functional features of this part of the city.

**1. GENERAL BACKGROUND OF THE REVITALISATION PROCESS
IN POTSDAM**

Potsdam is a city of about 150 thousand inhabitants, situated 25 km south-west of Berlin, on the Havel river. During the post-war period, in the immediate vicinity of the city *The Wall* was built dividing Berlin into the Western and Eastern part, as well as separating West Berlin from the rest of the then German Democratic Republic's territory. Since 1989 Potsdam is the capital of the federal state of Brandenburg.

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Among the architectural symbols of the city, the most famous is the residence of Prussian king Frederic the Great, comprising a palace and park of Sanssouci – a monument included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

During the last years, thanks to numerous revitalisation projects, many other historical monuments and places, too, were restored and gained new life, enriching the stock of valuable cultural heritage objects of the city: the Old Market Square (*Alte Markt*) and the New Market Square (*Neue Markt*), historical city gates and historical quarters – the Dutch Quarter (*Holländisches Viertel*) and the Baroque Quarter (*II. Barocke Stadterweiterung*).



Fig. 1. Buildings in the historical centre of Potsdam at the beginning of the 1990s were mostly in a disastrous technical condition

Photo: A. Wojnarowska, 2004

In the case of Potsdam, similarly to many other East German towns, we can talk of twofold background of spatial distortions and technical degradation of the historical urban zones (figure 1). Firstly, a substantial part of the historical structure, including the Royal Palace (*Stadtschloss*) situated in the Old Square, was destroyed by air raids during the Second World War. And secondly, in the post-war period, the communist regime sought to eradicate all traces of Prussian cultural heritage. It did not undertake the effort of rebuilding the damaged or destroyed historical buildings, but replaced them with new objects and introduced new town planning solutions deliberately damaging the traditional urban structure of the city. This direction in planning was common in East Germany between 1945 and 1990, reflecting the political situation and conservation rules, not favourable to reconstruction of historical monuments. Such planning decisions led to rejection of the idea of reconstruction and to introduction of modern structures in historical areas of towns and cities (Billert 2007, pp. 11–17).

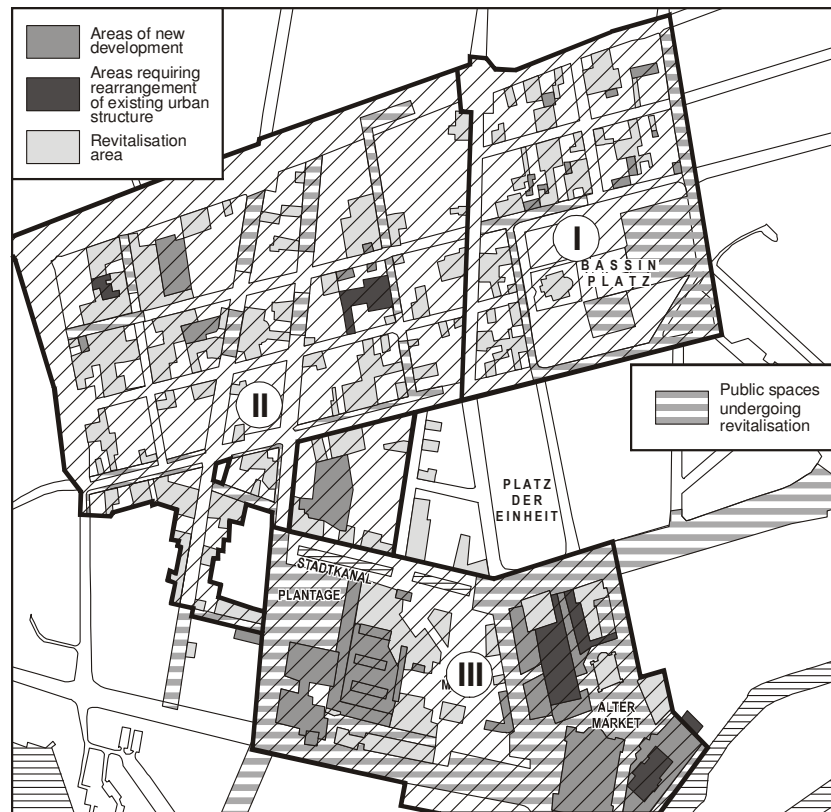


Fig. 2. Areas of revitalisation in the historical center of Potsdam: I – *Hollandisches Viertel*, II – *II. Barocke Erweiterung*, III – *Potsdamer Mitte*

Source: Sanierungsträger Potsdam (2004)

The situation changed in 1990, after the unification of both parts of Germany, when local authorities and community of Potsdam, with strong engagement and support of professional circles of architects and town planners, undertook first steps leading to regeneration of historical central areas of the city.

In 1991 municipalities appointed the revitalisation operator – *Sanierungsträger Potsdam*. As a symbol of willingness to reclaim the city centre as the ‘heart’ of the city – through restoration of historical urban structure of this area and revival of its traditional functions – a temporary theatre building of was erected, adjacent to the location of the former Royal Palace. It was a material sign of the planned changes.

The revitalisation programme of the central areas of Potsdam encompasses three areas: I – the Dutch Quarter (*Hollandisches Viertel*), II – the Baroque Quarter (*II. Barocke Erweiterung*) and III – Center of Potsdam (*Potsdamer Mitte*) (figure 2).

2. REVITALISATION AREAS: I – THE DUTCH DISTRICT AND II – THE BAROQUE DISTRICT¹

Historic areas of Potsdam have not undergone renovation or conservation since the end of the Second World War. Due to subsequent degradation they have become depopulated – some of the inhabitants moved out from substandard flats in historical buildings to modern large scale housing estates, and some buildings were completely abandoned due to their bad technical condition. Both historical areas mentioned were included in the revitalisation programme in 1992. The main goal of the programme was renovation of the degraded building stock and public spaces, making the area an attractive place for inhabitants and visitors to live, work and spend leisure time, and restoration of cultural values in respect of architecture and urban planning. A very important feature of the programme was the fact that real estate owners were given the possibility to get financial support from local and national government (*Landes- und Bundesmittel*) (Sanierungsträger Potsdam, 2004).

Projects aiming at bringing back inhabitants to the central quarters were strictly connected with tasks in the field of cultural heritage conservation – they involved adaptation of buildings for new functions, but with a particular focus on preservation and enhancement of historical values.

The basic rule adopted for the functional structure of revitalised areas was the mix-use concept – combination of residential, work, trade, services and touristic functions. At least 50% of total surface area of buildings was to be devoted to the residential function. Another important goal was maximum diversity of trade and service offer so as to create an attractive counter-offer for huge supermarkets. Much emphasis was also placed on animation of local social and cultural life, through creating new possibilities of spending leisure time, offering new premises in revitalized buildings to music and theatre ensembles, renovation of educational and sports facilities, and restoration of churches and social housing.

At the start of the revitalisation process as much as 80% of the buildings in both revitalisation areas were in very bad technical condition, with many of them derelict for a long time. From 1992 to 2004 about 300 of the total number of 600 historical buildings were completely renovated. Regarding the public spaces, altogether 70% of existing public space – streets and squares – were subjected to modernisation to provide attractive urban promenades and meeting places (BIG, SES, Sanierungsträger Potsdam, 2004).

¹ The era of intensive spatial development of Potsdam was the eighteenth century, when two considerable enlargements of the city's area took place – the first one between 1721 and 1725, and the second one in the years 1733–1740. The remains of city walls from that time are visible today as a big promenade to the north and west of the Baroque Quarter.



Fig. 3. Great care was taken – regarding the design, details, material, elements of small architecture and greenery – to upgrade both public spaces and private backyards

Photo: J. Wesołowski, 2004

The Dutch Quarter is an area consisting of four urban blocks, intersected by two streets, densely built up with red brick gabled houses, typical of Dutch architecture. The whole area was originally built between 1734 and 1742. The Dutch Quarter always functioned as a self-sufficient dwelling and working area, so the general principle in the revitalisation process was ‘development in the greenery’ (*Das rote Viertel am grünen Platz*) (Sanierungsträger Potsdam, 1995).

Ground floors of buildings housed shops, coffee bars and restaurants, while apartments were on the upper floors. The areas between buildings were dedicated to private gardens, neighbourly spaces, paths, passages and greenery.

An important element of the programme was re-organisation of the vehicle transport system, the main objectives being elimination of the transit traffic from the historical downtown area, and to create pedestrian passages and mitigated traffic streets and squares, devoted mainly to pedestrians and bicycles. A very difficult problem to be resolved, as usual in densely developed historical districts, was provision of parking space. Some parking lots on the ground level as well as multi-storey garages were envisaged. The priority was to ensure parking space for the inhabitants. To deal with this problem, parking lanes were created along the sides of the existing local streets.

Regarding the quality of living, dense historical urban structure is often unsatisfactory in many respects. The main problem is usually the lack of greenery, playgrounds for children, open spaces for sports and recreation for young people and adults, and inadequate lighting and ventilation of buildings.

In Potsdam a compromise was found between the standards and requirements of cultural heritage preservation/conservation and provision of high-quality living environment which would be an attractive alternative to living in city outskirts and would attract new inhabitants to the revitalized historical inner areas.

The front walls of old buildings, adjacent to the street, were reconstructed with great care to restore their historical shape, but the inner spaces were reconstructed in an innovative way. Substandard elements of existing development like sheds, side-buildings and outbuildings were demolished, giving way to new arrangement of space – attractive recreation areas, playgrounds and green spaces were provided, as well as utility spaces for residents of adjoining buildings. At the back side of some of the buildings were built terraces and small gardens, offering a unique possibility of having private open space in the heart of the city (figures 3–5).



Fig. 4. *Holländisches Viertel*: the buildings seen from the street form a continuous row

Photo: J. Wesółowski, 2004



Fig. 5. *Holländisches Viertel*: in the interior of the blocks open spaces were created – public, semi-public and private, giving the feeling of intimacy in spite of living in the city centre

Photo: J. Wesółowski, 2004

In both areas some new buildings were also introduced, their sizes and building materials matching the existing historical structure. They usually represent the service function – hotels, small offices, workshops, and social infrastructure objects.

Inside the courtyards every square meter was renovated and provided with elements of small architecture and greenery – here found location small restaurants, pubs, clubs and coffee shops, offering often only few, but very cosy places for their customers.

3. REVITALISATION AREA III – THE CITY CENTER (*POTSDAMER MITTE*)

The historic centre of Potsdam is the Old Market, dominated until the Second World War by the Royal Palace, erected in 1662. From the reign of Frederic the Great, the Palace served as the winter residence of Prussian kings. In 1754 the Old Market was transformed into a modern town square. The vast palace building, set on a rectangular plan with a huge yard inside, had an entrance from the Old Market square through the Fortuna Portal. The Royal Palace, Town Hall, St Michel's Church and Barberini Palace formed the walls surrounding the Old Square.

The City Center Revitalisation Area consists of two historical squares: the Old Market (*Alter Markt*) and the New Market (*Neuer Markt*) and urban blocks limited in the north and west by a line of water canals, and in the south by the premises of the National Garden Exhibition, held in Potsdam in 2001.

The ruins of the Royal Palace, which was destroyed during the carpet bombing in 1945, remained till 1961, when they were removed by the GDR communist government. In the 1970s, exactly in the place of the south-west corner of the former palace building, an out-scaled intersection of streets was constructed, which not only completely distorted the historical plan of the Old Market, but also annihilated social and cultural life in the most important central place of the city: the Old Market had always been the beloved, traditional place of meetings for inhabitants and visitors (figures 6–7).



Fig. 6. The city centre was rebuilt in communist times, which destroyed its historical spatial structure: next to historical monuments new modernist buildings were constructed, of low architectural value

Photo: A. Wojnarowska, 2004



Fig. 7. The spatial composition of this part of the city was completely distorted by introduction of high-rise buildings and over-scaled intersection of streets

Photo: A. Wojnarowska, 2004

The main goal of revitalisation in this area was restoring its historical spatial, social and cultural character, and introducing some modern functions. In that way the city should obtain a chance to bring back the evidence of its history and create a city centre of appropriate scale and status.

Within the framework of the revitalisation programme proposals for transport route modifications were prepared, focusing on the partial (to a possible extent) restoration of the historical urban structure. They included reconstruction of the existing artery and the huge junction so that traffic would go round the site where the Royal Palace was located. In its place the construction of a new object was proposed – a modern building housing the Parliament of the State of Brandenburg. The proposed building would imitate in plan and volume the historical building of the Palace, being at the same time very modern in its architectural appearance (figure 8).

The first step towards the implementation of this idea was the reconstruction in 2002 of the historical Portal of Fortune (Sanierungsträger Potsdam, 2001b), the former main entrance to the Palace from the Old Market square.



Fig. 8. The City Centre Revitalisation Area: visualisation of the new building of the State of Brandenburg Parliament, built in the place of the former Royal Palace. A new traffic solution for this area is also visible, including a new street going round the proposed Parliament building corner, the pedestrian zone near the city centre and green areas near the river bank, being a part of the former National Garden Exhibition

Source: Sanierungsträger Potsdam (2001b)

Construction work on the Parliament building was to be finished by the end of 2010, but it has not even started yet, mainly because of the global economic crisis, which has had a negative impact on the investment market and caused substantial limitation of funds for revitalisation projects at national and local level.²

Due to very intensive and widely planned urban regeneration activities, Potsdam was able to submit its proposal to host the National Garden Exhibition (*Bundesgartenschau*) in 2001. Organisation of the BUGA was a very important element of the early stage of the revitalisation programme. It provided a stimulus for the forthcoming changes, reinforcing the city's functions and its identity, and enhancing to building the image of the city centre as an attractive space for the inhabitants and tourists.

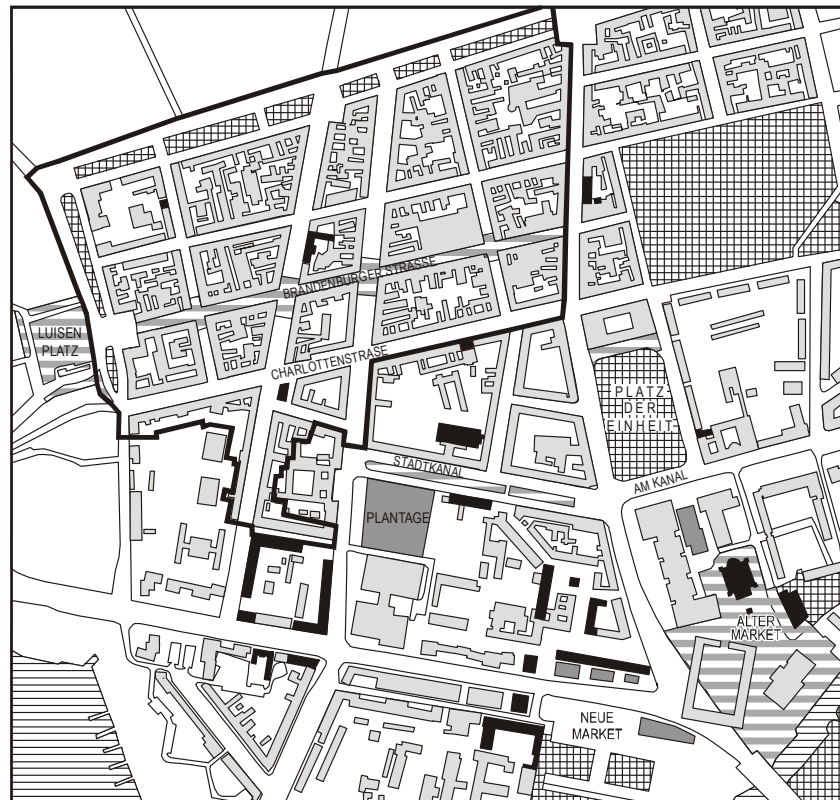


Fig. 9. Revitalisation of green areas in the city centre, including reconstructed historical water canals and the arrangement of Potsdam BUGA areas in 2001

Source: Sanierungsträger Potsdam (2001)

² <http://www.potsdam.de/cms/beitrag/10000933/26990/>, 08.2009.

Preparations for the National Garden Exhibition included a number of projects which resulted in conservation of existing recreational and green areas, creation of new green areas, and their connecting by a system of pedestrian and cycling paths. One of the implemented projects was a new pedestrian bridge, connecting *Freundschaftsinsel* with the riverside south of the Old City. The new elements of the greenery system also included revitalised water canals, and reconstructed promenades planted with trees (figure 9).

4. RECONSTRUCTION OF HISTORICAL WATER CANALS – AN ELEMENT OF THE REVITALISATION PROGRAMME OF THE CENTRAL AREA OF POTSDAM

Water canals were important elements of the historical urban structure of Potsdam's central area. They constitute a characteristic feature of both the Baroque and the Dutch Districts. In 1722 King Frederic Wilhelm the First ordered the rebuilding of previous water trenches into Dutch style canals. After the Second World War they were decked and in this place new traffic arteries were constructed. It was decided, as part of the revitalisation programme, to have them re-opened, as an important element of the city's identity. The projects of that kind have recently been implemented in many European cities and towns whose origin and development were closely related to water.³



Fig. 10. One of the re-opened water canals – for the past few decades in this place was a transport artery leading heavy traffic

Photo: A. Wojnarowska, 2004

³ An example of such initiatives is the European programme entitled 'Water in historical city centers'. This programme included the cities of Ghent, Mechelen, Breda, 's-Hertogenbosch, Chester and Limerick. In all of these cities historical watercourses were the foundation of regeneration programmes, as the main element of spatial composition, underpinning the identity of the city.

The majority of the historical water canals are situated within the city centre – they encircle the Dutch District and the Baroque District in the north and west, and a smaller section of the canals forms the northern and western border of the quarters situated close to the New Market. The revitalisation project included re-opening of historical canals, which caused the necessity of rebuilding the existing streets and giving them back the character appropriate for the central district (figure 10). Regrettably, the beautiful historical bridges were not reconstructed – the revitalisation project included construction of new pedestrian bridges. Along canal embankments rows of trees were planted, which should in future re-create the old landscape of promenades along the canals.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the era of globalisation, when cities are seeking competitive advantages, historically shaped urban structure of a city and its monuments are unique assets that contribute to its attractiveness and outstanding position. They are significant elements of the city's identity, understood as 'a set of historically conditioned characteristics of the city, which distinguish it from other cities, and are expressed in all activities which are undertaken in the city to create its inimitable individuality and character' (Glińska, Florek and Kowalewska, 2009, p. 37).

Many of the cities which in consequence of their development path lost these individual attributes are nowadays undertaking initiatives aimed at regaining their unique historical values.

All the projects implemented within the revitalisation programme for central areas of Potsdam were guided by the idea of restoring a well-structured and viable city centre. It was assumed that the basic rule of this conception should be reconstruction, to a reasonable extent, of historically developed urban structure and architectural features of this part of the city. A city centre should not only be an interesting urban space, but, in the first place, should create a scene for the city's social, economic and cultural life – a specific 'city showroom'.

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