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Procedia Engineering 161 (2016) 221 – 225

**Procedia
Engineering**www.elsevier.com/locate/procedia

World Multidisciplinary Civil Engineering-Architecture-Urban Planning Symposium 2016,
WMCAUS 2016

Issues of the Revitalization of Historic Centres in Small Towns in Warmia

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Abstract

Warmia is a historical region in north-eastern Poland, which – together with the neighbouring region of Mazury – is called the Land of a Thousand Lakes. The conquest of this territory by the Teutonic Order, which took place in the 13th century, gave rise to the foundation of 12 towns in Warmia. The towns were planned in line with the medieval urban patterns, featuring chessboard-like layout of a grid of streets, a central marketplace with a town hall in the middle, and compact blocks of townhouses.

The problems related to the revitalization of small towns in Warmia are mostly associated with their historic centres, which manifest their identity. The complexity of elements of which such historic urban centres are composed (spatial factors, such as urbanistic and architectural ones, related to the conservation of historic buildings and structures, economic and social aspects) necessitates such transformations that will lead to a better exposure and functional revitalization of the old town in comparison to other parts of a city. The aim of our study has been to find out how the image and functions performed of old towns can be improved. The changes involve certain urbanistic and architectural transformations as well as economic and social revitalization. The key to success is to develop revitalization programmes for individual historic districts in the towns of Warmia.

The research has enabled us to draw conclusions in regard to including numerous aspects and connections between spatial factors and functions of old towns. Revitalization efforts should focus on the elimination of sources of threat, improvement of the technical condition and aesthetic values of the space (urbanistic patterns and layouts, architecture of urban complexes) and the betterment of living standards and conditions for local residents. Having achieved this, we will re-focus on the status of historic town centres, on their essential role in the contemporary life of towns, and on the need to preserve the heritage of whole Warmia.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of WMCAUS 2016

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Keywords: architecture; urban studies; revitalization; conservation of historic buildings and structures;

1. Introduction

Warmia is a region in north-eastern Poland, whose history of settlement dates back to the earliest time of the Polish statehood. Together with the neighbouring region of Mazury, this area is known as the Land of a Thousand Lakes. The conquest of this territory, at that time occupied by Baltic Prussian tribes, completed by the order of Teutonic Knights in the 13th century gave rise to the foundation of twelve Warmian towns. For centuries, most of them have been small towns. The policy of the Teutonic Order aimed at setting up towns (all were created within the span of a century) in a way that combined military and topographic factors (fortified walls surrounding towns located in hardly accessible places) with the medieval principles of urbanistic composition (a chessboard-like layout of a grid of streets, a central marketplace with a town hall in the middle, compact blocks of townhouses). The military origin of the Warmian towns (each town lay at the foot of a castle) distinguishes these urban centres from ones located elsewhere in Poland [1]. The history of these towns as well as their more contemporary development are a consequence of their similar location, functions and, above all, spatial characteristics.

The current spatial structure of small towns in Warmia, including their historic centres, results from more recent, dramatic historical events, especially the ones which occurred at the end of World War Two, when the Soviet Army began a purposeful and systematic destruction of historic buildings in East Prussia. Another contributor was the post-war reconstruction of damaged towns, which was subordinated to the then political system of Poland. As a result, many historic town centres lost their identity. The consequences can be seen in many towns across the whole region. Frequently, historic patterns of urban complexes were violated and the buildings replacing the ruined ones were over scaled or designed paying little respect to the traditional architecture. These observations justify all efforts to create revitalization programmes for Warmian towns, which represent the material heritage of the regional culture.

2. The spatial structure of historic centres in Warmian towns

Small towns in Warmia represent regular urban structures arranged in chessboard-like patterns, characteristic for the Middle Ages. The medieval concepts dictated the layout of streets, the size and proportions of market squares and the location of public facilities and buildings in what is now known as the Old Town in each Warmian urban settlements. These historic centres, in most cases, are still a dominant element in composition patterns and in broader town centres (Fig. 1.).

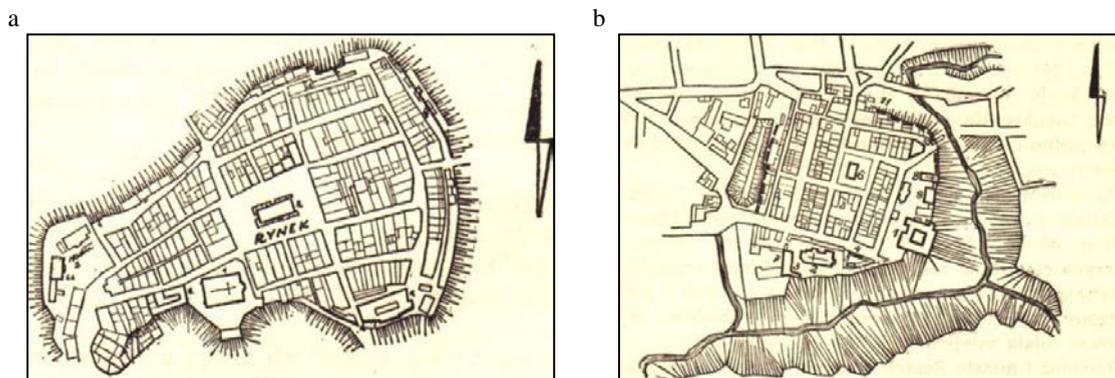


Fig. 1. (a) Street plan of Old Town in Orneta; (b) Street plan of Old Town in Reszel [2].

The current state of preservation of these historic town districts is rather varied across the whole region. The two main reasons are the war damage and post-war reconstruction. The latter was often completely detached from the

actual scale and character of those town centres. Such failed reconstruction efforts are evident in Biskupiec, Bisztynek, Dobre Miasto, Lidzbark Warmiński or Pieniężno (Fig. 2.). In addition, the region's poor economic situation, including such undesirable developments as very high unemployment or migration to larger towns and cities, undermine the position of small towns. However, some of the analysed cases are worth attention as examples of towns in which the urbanistic and architectural structure has been preserved well enough to reflect their historic identity. These are Jeziorany, Orneta and Reszel (Fig. 3.), which have retained their individual character of a town with centuries-old tradition architecture and own emotional atmosphere, i.e. the town's 'genius loci' [3].

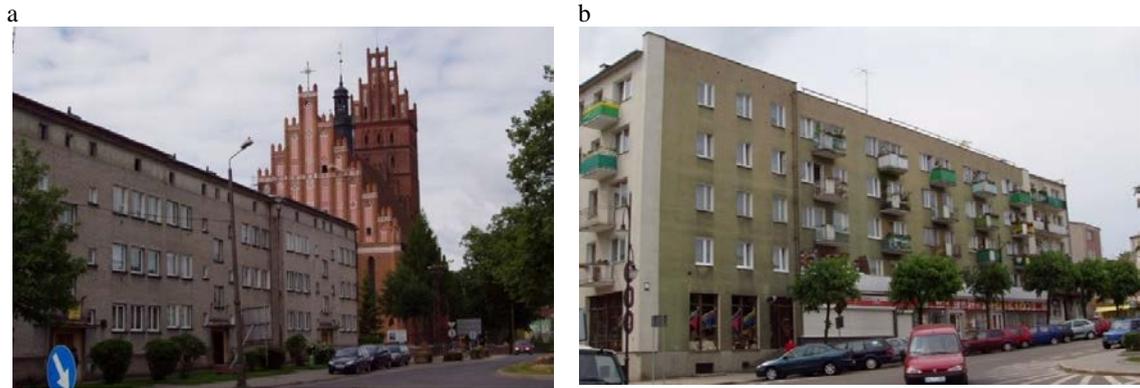


Fig. 2. (a) The Old Town marketplace in Dobre Miasto; (b) The Old Town marketplace in Lidzbark Warmiński.

The contemporary state of preservation of these oldest parts of towns in Warmia justifies every revitalization effort, which should be supported by search for economic and social ground for the towns' growth. Their tourist potential, largely overlooked by the tourist industry, seems to be an available solution. But in order to attract tourists, the towns need to develop revitalization programmes that will aim at their improved functioning, which can be achieved through adequate management of their historic centres, betterment of living conditions and economic development. A town is principally a place for people to live in, and the Warmian towns, however small, are inhabited by a large share of the whole population living in Warmia.



Fig. 3. (a) The Old Town marketplace in Orneta; (b) The Old Town marketplace in Reszel.

3. Revitalization of historic centres in small Warmian towns

The spatial aspect of revitalization programmes for Warmian towns, encompassing both urban patterns and architecture, should mostly serve to achieve the material revitalization of historic town centres. In the long process of creating such programmes, whose one of the aims is to adjust municipal space to the current social and economic needs, we should be able to preserve our mutual cultural heritage. Transformations taking place within centres of towns touch on many aspects owing to the numerous functions that these areas perform. In general, the role of a town centre is defined by several factors: urbanistic and architectural relationships, concentration of various functions and public spaces (the centre-forming functions) as well as functional and social relationships.

Revitalization is a process that undergoes constant evolution and is strictly dependent on the relationship between the spatial management and the socio-economic situation, both concentrated within a relatively small area of the town centre. When all these roles are performed well, the historic district of a town gains in status and is better exposed against the backdrop of the other town's areas.

The evolutionary process of transformation was heavily disrupted in all small towns of Warmia by certain events in Poland's latest history, which have left a ghastly mark on the spacial arrangement of the towns' centres (Fig. 2.). This town's area is associated with exchange of all types of goods, both material and spiritual ones, which add to the appeal of the space and promotes social integrity, playing such an important role in the town's life.

The key to attaining the desired image and functions of small Warmian towns is to develop a method for their revitalization. The discussed concept method focuses on the spatial aspect of transformations in the town's structure, which necessitates an appropriately designed action strategy [4]. First, strategic aims are identified, which will facilitate making correct urban planning and design-related decisions. The aims are as follows:

- to prevent degradation of the spatial structure in its physical, economic and social aspects – an interdisciplinary approach [5],
- to improve the space's attractiveness,
- to respect the cultural heritage – the urbanistic and architectural assumptions,
- to improve the competitiveness of the town's centre relative to the town's other areas,
- to concentrate centre-forming functions and to improve access to the town's centre,
- to improve living conditions of the local communities.

The strategic aims should be perceived as a synthetic definition of the revitalization concept. The first aim is superior to the others and is a core objective of revitalization of an urban space. The strategic aims help define actions, their direction and execution – that is the activation of specific developments. The interdisciplinary nature of this revitalization method is distinguished by:

- the need to achieve inter-sector integration in the approach to spatial, economic and social issues,
- selection of adequate action tools and instruments and process management,
- reinforcement of the role of urbanistic design [6],
- participation of local communities in execution of individual tasks,
- precise identification of the revitalization goals and coordination of the execution plan,
- establishment of an institution which will organize and coordinate all elements of the revitalization process.

The above elements confirm the complexity of any revitalization programme based on strategic planning in the integrated management of a town's development [7]. Consequently, it is necessary to prioritize values and goals that are to be achieved based on the adopted action method.

4. Results

The underlying motivation for undertaking revitalization of historic centres in Warmian towns is the need to improve their functioning and to preserve the region's cultural heritage. Revitalization efforts should focus on eliminating sources of threats, improving the technical state of all components of the urban structure, ensuring better living standard and conditions for local residents, and enhancing the spatial aesthetic values of revitalized areas. The problems presented in this article substantiate certain conclusions with respect to advantages to be gained from creating and executing revitalization programmes for historic centres of towns. The following can be mentioned:

- reproduction of historically developed urbanistic patterns of streets and buildings,

- development of an urbanistic structure which corresponds to historical solutions (a finer urbanistic structure, the human dimension),
- re-creation of architectural compositions in accordance with the original assumptions (the scale of buildings, their zoning, materials, details, a more intimate character of the town),
- organization of public spaces in a town's centre (shops, services),
- reconstruction of the identity (appeal) of a town's centre.

The guidelines suggested above rely on the assumption that all small Warmian towns will have a general architectural and urbanistic concept developed. This in turn will require that each time a revitalization project is planned; some detailed analyses are in order. Their results will serve as a basis, in co-operation with local communities, for making very precise action plans and for their subsequent realization.

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