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# New Chances for Old Towns. 21st Century Revitalization in Historic Centres of Silesia

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**Abstract.** Silesia is a region of Central Europe with a complex and multicultural history. Its borders and nationality has changed repeatedly over the centuries. Consequently, Silesia's identity, culture and economy were shaped throughout the region's history by Polish, Czech, Austrian, Prussian and German influences. Since 1945 Silesia has been located mostly in Poland. The majority of Silesian towns was founded in the Middle Ages creating a regular system of a settlement network in the entire region. This process started at the beginning of the 13th century and was a part of dynamic urbanization of the entire Europe. The basic features of Silesian medieval urban structures, known presently as the Old Towns, are: an orderly plan, chequered grid of streets, regular blocks of development and a centrally located market square. Throughout the centuries historic towns in Silesia remained within their city walls, undergoing changes, rather than simply developing. It was only the 19th century that brought favourable circumstances for development. Unfortunately, as a result of the World War II, many Silesian historic centres were significantly damaged. After the period of the post-war rebuilding, the old towns in Silesia experienced a process of degradation resulting from the political and economic system of Poland in that period. The first possibilities to raise the quality of the old town areas appeared after the year 1989 with the Polish political transformation. In the 21st century, mainly thanks to EU funds, numerous projects were implemented within the historic town centres of Silesia in the field of urban revitalization. The study presents the range and specificity of these activities undertaken and the review of the selected completed projects. The results help not only to assess the effects of the actions undertaken and their impact on the quality of urban living conditions, but to relate them to the towns' identities and their spatial uniqueness as well. Finally, the work is an attempt to answer the question to what extent a new life has been breathed to historic old town structures in Silesia. The analyses are based to a large extent on the Regional Operational Programmes elaborated in the years 2007-2013 in 4 administrative units, which form in various proportions the region of Silesia.

## 1. Introduction

Silesia is a historical land of Central Europe with a national affiliation changing many times over the centuries. In the Middle Ages the region was first incorporated into the Polish state, then divided into independent duchies. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the land became a part of the Bohemian Crown, which was subsequently absorbed by the Habsburg Monarchy in 16<sup>th</sup> century. Most of the region was annexed by Prussia in 1742, later becoming a part of the unified Germany. Since 1945 Silesia has been mostly a part of Poland, with small parts in the Czech Republic and Germany (figure 1). In connection with its



complex history, Silesia's identity has been shaped by multicultural influences. The region, spread along the Odra river, is an agricultural and forested lowland with a mountainous southern border. It includes also some industrial areas based on mineral resources. Silesia is one of the earliest inhabited areas of modern Poland with settlements dating back to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. When it comes to Silesian towns, most of them were founded in the Middle Ages, mainly on the basis of German law, forming a regular settlement network in the region. This process started at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and was a part of dynamic urbanization in Europe. Until the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century about 120 towns were founded in Silesia [1]. They lasted within their city walls until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, being suffering fires, epidemics and wars. The age of industrialization favoured expansion and development of the urban centres in Silesia. Unfortunately, as a result of the World War II many Silesian old towns were to varying degrees destroyed [2]. After the post-war rebuilding period, the majority of the old towns in Silesia, especially the small ones, fell into decline as a result of the system in Poland at that time. First actions to improve the quality of historic spaces were undertaken at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the 1989 transition in Poland. It was only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, thanks to EU funds, that complex revitalization projects could be realized within Silesian historic towns. This research presents the scope and specifics of these projects carried out in the field of urban revitalization. The results enable us not only to assess the effects of these actions and their impact on the quality of life, but to refer them to the towns' identities as well. Finally, the study is an attempt to form a preliminary answer, to what extent old towns in Silesia have been revitalized and what should be the further challenges. The analyses are based to a large extent on the **Regional Operational Programmes** elaborated in Poland in the years 2007-2013. Programmes executed in 4 administrative units: Lower Silesian, Lubusz, Opole and Silesian Voivodeships, which form in various proportions the region of Silesia, were particularly taken into account.



**Figure 1.** The 19<sup>th</sup> century Silesia superimposed on the present national border. Author's elaboration

## 2. The spatial structure of Silesian historic centres. Uniqueness in repetition

As far as the urban structure of Silesian medieval centres is concerned, distinctive features of their layouts, called today the old towns, are:

- Orderly plan determined by geometry.
- Grid of streets cutting each other at the right angle.
- Regular blocks of development.
- Centrally located, usually rectangular, market square.

These basic elements of historic spatial structures are generally still readable in today's Silesian old towns (figure 2). Unfortunately, there are historic centres in the region, which lost to a varying extent their identities due to the World War II damage and the decisions on the directions of post-war rebuilding.



**Figure 2.** a) Axonometric plan of the town Paczków in the 2nd half of the 18th century by F. B. Werner (Source: Wrocław University Library), b) Aerial view of the town Paczków in 2007 [3]

Despite the repetitiveness of some urban solutions, most of Silesian old towns with medieval origins have a unique and individual character, constituted by preserved to a varying extent or reconstructed historic churches and monasteries, castles, town halls, tenement houses and fortifications. This diverse heritage is represented by the consecutive styles, starting from Gothic, through Renaissance, Baroque and Neoclassicism to the architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries constituting an evidence of the continuous development of Silesian towns. Unfortunately, nowadays, in many historic centres of the region, historic buildings coexist with modern, disharmonic, post-war architecture.

### 3. Post-war rebuilding and maintenance

Until the World War II Silesian historic centres were preserved without significant changes, whereas the character of their development was undergoing transformations. In 1945 many historic towns in Silesia suffered severe destruction. Among the centres, which lost most of their old towns' development one should mention most of all: Brzeg, Głogów, Nysa, Strzelin and Wrocław. The post-war rebuilding was carried out in a diversified way. There are 3 approaches defined, in most cases applied in parallel [4]:

- Reconstruction of the destroyed development in compliance with historic urban layout (mainly sacral architecture and significant public buildings).
- Construction of new development with regard to such essential historical features as scale, heights, buildings lines, forms of the roofs.
- Construction of new development without reference to the past forms from before the 1945.

There were also historic centres in Silesia, which survived the war intact, such as Kłodzko and Paczków. The degradation of their old towns' structures started after the World War II and was caused not only by the neglect and lack or low-quality technical maintenance, but also by the uncertainty of new inhabitants as far as the stability of the western border of Poland was concerned. It's also important to emphasize that, as a consequence of the shift of Polish borders after the World War II an almost complete exchange of Silesian towns' inhabitants occurred. Between 1945 and 1949 around 250.000

new inhabitants came to the city of Wrocław replacing the German citizens, who had been forced to move out. This exchange had many dimensions: from ethnic, mental and religious to cultural and civilizational as well [5].

#### **4. Present-day revitalization in historic centres of Silesia. Regional Operational Programmes for the years 2007-2013**

After the period of post-war rebuilding, most of Silesian old towns went through the process of degradation resulting, as mentioned, from political, economic, technical and social reasons. The first possibilities to raise the quality of the old town areas in Poland appeared after the year 1989 with the Polish political transformation. Poland's membership in the European Union started in 2004 enabled the implementation of many comprehensive projects. In the 21st century numerous actions were undertaken within historic town centres of Silesia diagnosed in Local Revitalization Programmes, the basic revitalization policy documents of the cities, as areas of decline.

Many definitions of revitalization have been formulated. In fact, the towns, in their complex history, have been many times revitalized – experiencing fires, wars, floods. Currently, the term revitalization means a process of economic, social and spatial transformations within degraded parts of towns. The main aims of this process are: economic revival, improvement of living standards and restoring of spatial order [6]. The degradation in urban areas is manifested by gradual destruction of urban and architectural tissue, which concerns the buildings and the associated infrastructure. Apart from physical destruction such areas are affected by economic and social phenomena, such as low level of economic activity, high unemployment rate or crime rate.

Ample opportunities for urban revitalization of historic areas in Poland were created within the **Regional Operational Programmes (ROPs) for 2007-2013** co-financed from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Each of 16 Polish voivodeships elaborated its own programme of similar structure with the contents and financial resources specified individually. The priorities and actions concerning the revitalization of historic areas were formulated in the ROPs of 4 administrative units covering the region of Silesia as follows:

- Lower Silesian Voivodeship [7]:
  - priority 9: “Rehabilitation of degraded urban areas in Lower Silesia”.
  - action 9.1: “Renewal of degraded urban areas: towns with population more than 10.000”.
  - action 9.2: “Support for the projects in the field of housing: towns with population less than 10.000”.
- Lubusz Voivodeship [8]:
  - priority 4: “Development and modernisation of social infrastructure”.
  - action 4.3: “Revitalization of degraded urban and rural areas”.
- Opolskie Voivodeship [9]:
  - priority 6: “Mobilisation of Municipal and Degraded Area”.
  - action: 6.1: “Revitalization of urban areas”.
  - Action: 6.2. “Development of degraded areas”.
- Silesian Voivodeship [10]:
  - priority 6: “Sustainable Towns’ Development”.
  - action 6.2: “Revitalization of degraded areas”.

The main objective of the priority 9 in the Lower Silesian Voivodeship's Programme was to prevent a marginalization of the urban areas, where negative socio-economic phenomena and environmental degradation were recorded. There were nearly 40 towns in this highly urbanized region designated for assistance within the action 9.1, all of which met population criterion of having more than 10.000 inhabitants. The main aim concerning degraded areas, both rural and urban, in the Lubusz Voivodeship was to create appropriate conditions enabling the activation of development processes in the structurally weak territories through revitalization of these areas. Contrary to the other Regional Operational Programmes there were neither particular towns designated for assistance nor specific criteria

formulated in this region. In Opole Voivodeship, the smallest in terms of area and population, it was decided that assistance would be given mainly to the old town centres, buildings and sites of cultural heritage. The following cities could apply: Opole (the capital), 4 subregional centres (Brzeg, Kędzierzyn-Koźle, Kluczbork, Nysa) and maximum 10 out of the 20 towns designated for assistance fulfilling the population criterion of more than 5.000 inhabitants. The historic cores of most of these towns, founded in the Middle Ages, are under protection as monuments. The issues of revitalization of degraded areas in Silesian Voivodeship, the most urbanized region in Poland and highly industrialized, considered post-military, post-industrial and urban areas. The main focus was placed on the spatial order of public spaces to be restored, economic, tourist, recreational, social and cultural functions to be assigned.

## **5. General overview of the projects completed within the Regional Operational Programmes 2007-2013**

The overview of the revitalization projects completed within the historic centres of Silesia was conducted on the basis of the governmental web portal “EU grants map” [11]. More attention was paid to the projects based on a complex approach towards Silesian old towns, covering a set of actions and not limited to a single structure.

There were in total 391 projects completed in the Lower Silesian Voivodeship within the action 9.1. “Renewal of degraded urban areas: towns with population more than 10.000” and 45 within the action 9.2. “Support for the projects in the field of housing: towns with population less than 10.000”. In this region there are as many as 141 registered historic centres, most of them of the medieval origin [12]. A review of the projects completed in the areas of old towns indicates a diversity of actions undertaken. The analysis showed also the effectiveness and activity of the local authorities and to some extent of housing cooperatives in obtaining the EU funds for the revitalization of degraded areas. There were many projects concerning renovation of a single, historic tenement house or a public building located within the old town’s structure, an example is the town hall in Oława. Among the towns wherein the several complex projects were completed in the area of historic core one should mention: Kłodzko, Świdnica, Ząbkowice Śląskie, Jawor and Bolesławiec. As far as the range of the projects is concerned municipal authorities in Kłodzko focused on improving the conditions of cultural heritage structures (stronghold complex, underground tourist route, Młynówka Canal), also on historic housing, infrastructure of the Piasek Island and promotion activities. There was a variety of projects completed in Świdnica: several regarded the marketplace and its development; the others concerned the renewal of public spaces and historic buildings. There was also a project regarding the organization of a mass event referring to the history of Świdnica. The market square, planty park and backyards’ area were a subject of revitalization in Bolesławiec. The majority of the projects completed in Jawor regarded the improvements of technical infrastructure within its Old Town.

In the Lubusz Voivodeship 24 projects were completed within the action 4.3. “Revitalization of degraded urban and rural areas”. Projects regarding the revitalization of the old towns were implemented in 9 historic cores of the Lubusz Voivodeship. The analysis of the range of completed projects shows the high share of the improvements regarding transport infrastructure: a resurfacing of streets, pavements and squares, construction of new parking places and modernization of technical infrastructure (sewage, water, street lighting networks). Furthermore some projects dealt also with a post-war development in degraded historic areas. Special attention was paid to historic buildings as well. This group included, among others, the Gothic castle in Koźuchów adapted for a culture and sport center and renovated parish church in Nowe Miasteczko.

There were 31 projects completed in the Opole Voivodeship within the action 6.1. “Revitalization of urban areas.” In this region projects covering actions in the area of historic centres were carried out in 9 old towns, all protected as monuments within the borders of their medieval structures. The analysis of the range of activities carried out shows, similarly to the Lubusz Voivodeship, fairly high share of improvements regarding technical and transport infrastructure. There are also monitoring systems installed to ensure the safety of local residents (Kędzierzyn-Koźle). The project regarding a



revitalization of a medieval system of fortifications was completed in Paczków, whereas in Grodków, the quality of the Market Square's space was improved (figure 3).



**Figure 3.** (a) Medieval fortifications in Paczków; (b) The Market Square in Grodków,  
(Source: photos by the author)

141 projects were completed within the action 6.2 formulated as “Revitalization of Degraded Areas” in the **Regional Operational Programme of the Silesian Voivodeship for 2007-2013**. Due to the high industrialisation of the region, a large group of the projects concerned the post-industrial areas and structures. Also great attention was paid to the housing, which had been erected with the use of asbestos, then replaced with non-toxic solutions. There were only several projects regarding historic centres of the cities with the population of more than 50.000. One of them was Rybnik with its registered old town layout and the population of 137.000 inhabitants. The project covered the renewal of the public space in the area between two churches in the historic core of the town.

## 6. Three case studies

To take a closer look at the revitalization projects completed in the region of Silesia, 3 towns were selected: **Brzeg** in the Opolskie Voivodeship, **Nowe Miasteczko** in the Lubusz Voivodeship and **Świdnica** in the Lower Silesian Voivodeship. The towns differ in terms of population: there are fewer than 3.000 people living in Nowe Miasteczko, some 36.000 inhabitants in Brzeg and 58.000 in Świdnica. Their old towns of medieval origin are registered monuments.

**Brzeg** was founded on the left bank of the Odra river in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. The town's former splendour as the capital of the principality is confirmed by the Renaissance town hall and the castle of Silesian Piasts, also Gothic and Baroque churches [1,3]. More than 50% of the Old Town was destroyed in 1945, the post-war rebuilding works were carried out mostly with regard to the preservation of historical layout with the use of modern forms. In the Local Revitalization Programme for Brzeg, for the years 2009-2015, the Old Town was diagnosed as an area of decline requiring assistance to correct the negative social and spatial phenomena [13]. On the basis of the **Regional Operational Programme of the Opolskie Voivodeship for 2007-2013** and its action 6.1. “Revitalization of urban areas” the project “Revitalization of the urban space in the centre of Brzeg” was carried out. The range of the works in the area of the Old Town was largely limited to the improvements regarding the resurfacing of streets and pavements (streets: Długa, J. Dzierżonia, Jabłkowa, Staromiejska), underground technical infrastructure, new development of public squares (squares: Kościelny, Polonii Amerykańskiej). As the results, the quality of these urban spaces increased considerably (figure 4). A field survey of completed works conducted shows a complex need for further operations to be carried out, as the project covered only a small part of the Old Town. The market square with its unique Renaissance town hall, where

some works had been accomplished earlier, requires further attention, so do the backyards and green areas.

**Nowe Miasteczko** is a small town with a history dating back to the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century [1]. Its historic centre was not damaged during the World War II, its oval shaped layout with almost square marketplace and a grid of streets is still readable. There is the Renaissance town hall, two churches and a large group of residential buildings dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century certifying the historical development of the town. The project “Revitalization of the Old Town in Nowe Miasteczko” was carried out within the action 4.3. “Revitalization of degraded urban and rural areas”, based on the **Regional Operational Programme of the Lubusz Voivodeship for 2007-2013**. Works accomplished as part of the project covered such technical issues as: street and square surface renovation and modernization of underground networks. The renewed urban space was equipped with stylish and aesthetic street furniture. The actions covered also infrastructure required for mass events planned in the area of the Old Town. Furthermore, two churches located in the town were renovated along with the new development of the space around them. The town’s authorities plan to continue this process of regeneration also in the field of housing development as well. It seems that Nowe Miasteczko after years of stagnation seizes the new opportunity well.



**Figure 4.** (a) The Market Square and the Town Hall with restituted tower in Świdnica [14];  
(b) Polonii Amerykańskiej Square in Brzeg with Saint Nicolas church [15].

**Świdnica** was founded in the 13<sup>th</sup> century next to the crossroads of two trading routes. It was one of the wealthiest towns in Silesia in the past [1]. As its historic core was only slightly touched by World War II, the town’s former position is manifested by the Gothic cathedral, Baroque monasteries, town hall and palaces along with splendid historic tenement houses. The municipal authorities of Świdnica accomplished as many as 8 projects on the basis of the action 9.1. “Renewal of degraded urban areas: towns with the population of more than 10,000” as part of the **Regional Operational Programme of the Lower Silesia Voivodeship for 2007-2013**. Projects carried out in the area of the Market Square regarded: modernization of its surface, renovation of the mid-market square block and restitution of the town hall’s tower (figure 4). Furthermore a square in front of the Gothic cathedral was rearranged and two other streets modernized - one of them, Łukowa Street, became an attractive pedestrian zone. The above actions were supplemented by a social project regarding the organization of a mass event “Feast of Wild Boar”, aiming at the integration of the inhabitants and referring to the history of the town. The actions undertaken, definitely increased the quality of Old Town’s urban space along with some transfer to economic and social area.



## 7. Results and discussion

The basis of this research was the **Regional Operational Programmes 2007-2013** elaborated in 4 voivodeships constituting the Silesia region in Poland and the projects concerned urban revitalization in the area of its historic centres completed within these programmes. The research does not present all actions undertaken within the old towns during this period, as some projects could be implemented also on the basis of other priorities or separate programmes, which were not the object of this study.

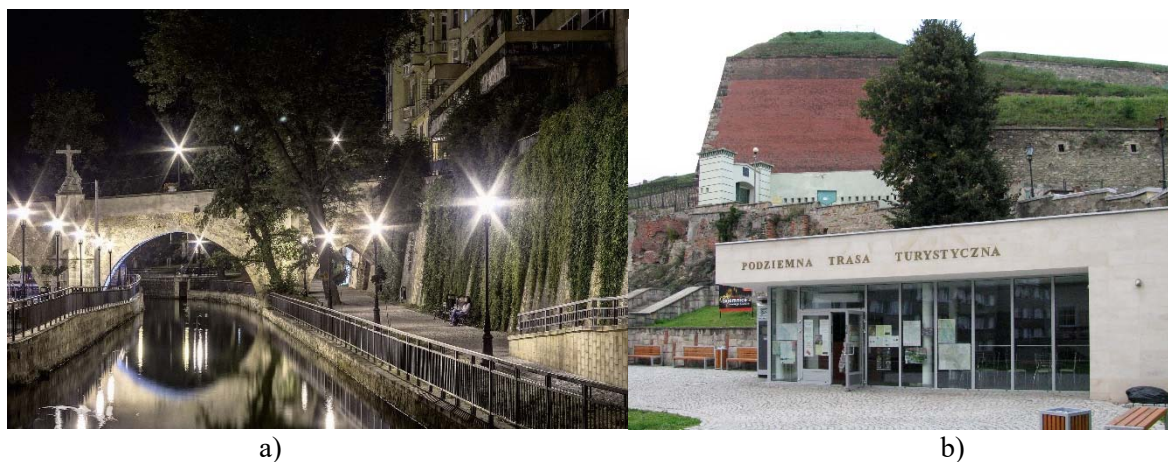
Urban revitalization can be defined as a set of policies and actions aiming at the following goals [16]:

- Protection, preservation, conservation or revitalization of cultural values, which create the identity of a given historic city.
- Promotion of the activities designed to strengthen its economic base.
- Improvement of the quality of life of its local population.

The actions implemented should combine harmoniously these three types of goals, which are often conflicting and contradictory.

Analyses of the range of works accomplished as part of the Regional Operational Programmes 2007-2013 indicate some general priorities such as (figure 5):

- Promotion of the cultural heritage.
- Strengthening of tourism potential.
- Conservation of historic buildings.
- Improvements of historic and post-war housing.
- Modernization of technical and transport infrastructure.
- Increasing the sense of security (monitoring systems installed).



**Figure 5.** Promotion of the cultural heritage and strengthening of tourism potential in Kłodzko [17].

a) Młynówka Canal and its pedestrian zone; b) The Underground Tourist Route.

Although according to the assumptions of the priorities analyzed in the Regional Operational Programmes, the undertakings should combine the development of infrastructure with actions for socio-economic revival, the research indicates, that completed works within Silesian historic centres are largely focused on the technical interventions to the degraded urban tissue, without any direct actions aiming at eliminating social and economic aspects of degradation. On the one hand, the high share of the projects concern modernization of neglected underground and transport infrastructure, improvements of housing along with renovation of historic public buildings. On the other hand, the aestheticization of the urban space has also a social aspect – a good quality of the space has a direct impact on human life and the comfort of residents, furthermore it stimulates creativity and social

activity. The improvement of technical infrastructure has an impact on investment attractiveness of the area as well.

A separate issue constitutes the analysis of design solutions for the redevelopment of the old town squares and streets in regards to the floor surface and street architecture. Generally, the solutions were based on high-quality building materials like stone, metal and wood (figure 6). Apart from the stone cubes and slabs (mainly granite), traditional cobblestones were also used for the pavement. The street furniture installed in the historic areas, such as streetlamps, benches, litter bins, pot plants, tree protections, are often inspired by the traditional forms, and are sometimes based on the modern shapes too. Standard solutions are commonly applied, whereas individually designed pieces of equipment tailored to a specific location are rarely met. Such an approach results, in case of some revitalized historic public spaces, in a lack of individual character and no particular reference to the town's history or its identity. This is as opposed to the renovation of historic public buildings carefully considered and carried out on the basis of conservation requirements. The results of the latter strengthened the towns' identities and tourism potential, additionally a certain number of new jobs were created.



**Figure 6.** Design solutions based on high-quality building materials.  
(a, b) The Market Square in Grodków. (Source: photos by the author).

## 8. Conclusions

The majority of talks with the inhabitants of revitalized historic centres in the Silesia region indicates their acceptance and satisfaction with the results. It looks also that the process of improvement builds their sense of togetherness and attachment. The analyses prove also the high effectiveness and activity of many local authorities, which successfully applied first and then efficiently implemented several projects. The opportunity of obtaining the EU funds was essential to the revitalization processes undertaken in the historic centres. The actions accomplished in the area of Silesian old towns definitely improved the quality of urban tissue and the living conditions, initiating also some beneficial socio-economic processes. Although the new opportunities have been well used, it should be noted, that the results due to the complex needs are to various extent on a fragmented basis. This is why there is a significant need to proceed further with individual projects in 2014-2020 programming period in order to continue the revival of the old centres.

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