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## CONTEMPORARY REVITALIZATION OF PUBLIC SPACES IN ŁÓDŹ: THE ROLE OF SQUARES, STREETS AND COURTYARDS IN CREATING THE GENIUS LOCI, BASED ON HISTORICAL HERITAGE

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**ABSTRACT:** Despite its medieval origins (1423), the city of Łódź is young. It flourished as an important industrial center in the nineteenth century, becoming the second largest city in Poland in the twentieth. Its “American” plan with one main street and districts developing around factories is unusual in Poland and leaves little room for city squares and public space. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Łódź has been trying to create more shared areas because they underwent far-reaching degradation after the transformation of 1989 and the economic crisis of the 1990s. Nowadays, however, these areas are being revitalized. There are many competitions and projects concerning both the rehabilitation of existing city squares and the creation of new ones. However, the term “city square” has largely lost its original, traditional meaning, with “square” now covering a variety of open spaces, ranging from pedestrian streets to courtyards. The article discusses selected examples of municipal and private investments in squares, streets and parks. Despite the positive reception of these urban changes, the “renewal” of the city is criticized by specialists and considered controversial.

The article attempts to analyze these solutions in terms of urban planning as well as urban landscape and ecology, also venturing to gauge whether such solutions can be considered modern and adequate to the requirements of twenty-first-century urban planning.

**KEYWORDS:** Łódź; revitalization; urban landscape

## Introduction

Despite its medieval origins (1423), the city of Łódź is young. It flourished as an important industrial center in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth, it was already the second largest city in Poland. Its “American” plan with one main street and districts developing around factories is untypical for Poland. Its implementation left little space for city squares and public space. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, however, Łódź has been trying to create more shared areas. Unfortunately, after the transformation of 1989 and the economic crisis of the 1990s, these areas underwent far-reaching degradation. Similarly to other European post-industrial cities, Łódź began to lose its economic foundations, which exacerbated its spatial and demographic problems. Nowadays, Łódź is undergoing revitalization, with extensive and well-thought-out projects aiming to improve not only the visual aspect as well as architectural and historical values, but also the quality of life, spatial and functional structure as well as the city’s new image. It is worth remembering, however, that public space is complex and multidimensional, while its very concept is blurred. The term “city square” has largely lost its traditional meaning and is now used to denote a variety of open spaces, from pedestrian streets to courtyards. Further, it is not only the lack of consistent terminology in relation to public space that causes problems, but also the irregular methodology of research. The latter leads to problems with defining revitalization goals, making the right diagnoses, and even respecting historical heritage. There is often no synergistic cooperation between experts, decision-makers (city authorities) and residents.

Sociologists emphasize that already in “the very concept of public space there is a wealth of meanings, divisions and references to many contexts (legal, topographical, cultural, social and political”, while “all decisions regarding spatial transformations that ultimately affect the quality of space should be considered holistically and dynamically in the longer term” (Dymnicka 2013). Due to historical conditions, including the industrial genesis of Łódź and the crisis of the 1990s, the question of the city’s public spaces is special. Ernestyna Szpakowska-Loranc and Agnieszka Matusik emphasize that “Łódź, similarly to industrial-era British cities, is a structural and social phenomenon. The city’s metamorphosis, actually enabled by crises, has evened out the structural and functional deficiencies of its original structure. It is for this reason that Łódź is a globally interesting case that merits further study and demonstrates the regenerative capacity of this post-industrial city” (Szpakowska-Loranc & Matusik 2020). Nowadays, there are many competitions and projects in Łódź concerning both the rehabilitation of existing city squares and the creation of new ones.

This article examines selected, diverse examples of municipal and private investments in squares, streets and parks. Each of the presented projects is associated with a different problem or risk.

### **(New) Old Town Square – modernization of a forgotten area**

The Old Town Square is a historically unique space, which required urgent intervention and modernization. For many years it had been an unfriendly, empty, lifeless space, one made additionally difficult owing to its complex history. It is located in the Bałuty District, in close proximity to the center, less than a kilometer from the Liberty Square, the main city axis Piotrkowska Street and Manufaktura.

The Old Town Square is the oldest part of Łódź. It was the heart of the original farming settlement of wooden houses. In the nineteenth century, when the city was dynamically developing, the Old Market Square remained on the sidelines of major investments (as the new, industrial city developed in the south of the Old Town Square). It was also the lively center of the Jewish district and a bustling trading place surrounded by small tenement houses. During the Second World War and the German occupation, the Old Town Square as well as a significant part of Bałuty were turned into a ghetto. Today's buildings in the square come from the 1950s and were designed by a team led by Ryszard Karłowicz. At that time, historically stylized tenement houses with arcades were erected on three sides, the square was tidied up and new details were added. The northern frontage remained undeveloped, opening onto a park established in the 1950s (Mowszowicz 1962). This (new) Old Town Square has become an integral element of the city's landscape, while its historic architecture comprises a true monument, although it is not registered as a protected area. This picturesque and intimate location has been conducive to the positive reception of the Old Town Square, despite the fact that it did not perform significant urban functions, remaining largely empty and neglected. Attempts to revive this space were bottom-up, with artistic contributions. Although the last were interesting and included Jerzy Janiszewski's Ribbons<sup>1</sup> or the Light Move Festival installations, they attracted the attention of visitors only for a short time. Currently, the Old Town Square is undergoing a thorough transformation.<sup>2</sup> It is planned to replace its entire surface as well as remove steps and some historical details. Two fountains are to occupy the central part of the market. The New-Old Town Square is meant to become a commercial and exhibition space. Therefore, roofed trading stalls will be arranged, while place for a commercial pavilion will be provided in the southern part, facing the park. However, new functions of this space seem to be only potential as they are defined very generally and unrelated to the needs of the inhabitants. The square is also to become a space for rest and relaxation, the plans including green areas and benches. The original design did not include greenery, but strong opposition from residents led to its addition. It is difficult to fully ascertain the social significance of this place and the function it will come to play in urban space. The Old Town Square's general renovation is scheduled to conclude by the end of 2023, but there are already concerns about certain aspects of its historic heritage, primarily details from the 1950s (fig. 1 and 2)

### **Manufaktura Square – the new city center?**

“Manufaktura” is the name of the new shopping, entertainment and service center developed at the site of a textile factory built after 1871 by Izrael Kalmanowicz Poznański. Located ca

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- 1 “Concert for Ribbons” was an installation aimed at enlivening the square in reference to its pre-war genesis as a lively place for trade. It was organized in 2016 by the Urban Forms Foundation. See: <https://www.urbanforms.org/fundacja/artystyci/jerzy-janiszewski/>.
  - 2 See: <https://uml.lodz.pl/aktualnosci-lodzpl/artykul-lodzpl/rewitalizacja-starego-ryнку-sprawdzamy-na-jakim-etapie-jest-remont-zdjecia-id50315/2022/5/23/>.



Fig. 1. Old Town Market.

300 meters west of the Old Town Square, in the valley of the Łódka River, the nearly thirty-hectare area housed a factory complex with its own gasworks, fire station and railway siding. The owner's palace (today the Museum of the History of Łódź) and some office buildings were built in the south-eastern part. To the south of the factories, quarters of worker houses were constructed (Stefański 2001). It was in fact a city-within-city situated just west from the Old Town. After 1945, the factory was nationalized and operated until 1997, becoming one of the largest textile factories in Poland. However, the fall of communism also led to the collapse of the entire industry in Łódź. Today, abandoned and decaying post-industrial areas have been designated for transformation as part of one of the largest revitalization projects in Europe. Nowadays, the complex has an area of approximately 27 hectares and includes a shopping center, restaurants, museums, cinemas, fitness clubs, etc. Although the center is a modern construction, certain nineteenth-century, historic, post-industrial buildings have been





Fig. 2. Old Town Market.

preserved. Despite the method of conservation being imperfect, the red-brick buildings are clear evidence of the history of the place.<sup>3</sup>

One of the effects of the demolition of value-less twentieth-century industrial halls was the creation of a spacious square (3.5 ha) in the center of the complex. It is developed on three sides and opens to the east onto the Staromiejski Park. In this way, something like a central square was incidentally developed, the place quickly becoming a favorite meeting place, surrounded with restaurants and terraces. The space in the middle of the square is used for various purposes: concerts, cultural events, etc. It features an artificial beach in the summer and an ice rink in winter. Indeed, local residents call it “rynek” [central square], confirming how it is regarded in everyday life, aside from its appearances in the media, for example (Fleming 2012).

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3 See: <http://www.sudarchitectes.pl/projekty-projects/manufaktura-2/>

It appears paradoxical that the original medieval square is located nearby. However, it was almost completely unused after 1945. Hopefully, its situation will improve after revitalization. Unfortunately, there is no direct pedestrian connection with the park and the Old Town area as the route leads through a busy, two-lane artery with trams, where the crossing does not solve the problem of communication despite traffic lights. As a result, Manufaktura's main square is separated from the park and the Old Town Square.

After WWII Łódź had no main square, unlike other cities in Poland. The heart of the city was located in the northern section of Piotrkowska Street. In this light, the spontaneous creation of the Manufaktura Square can be regarded positively. On the other hand, it is worth remembering that this is in fact private space, created by a private investor. It thus constitutes another



Fig.3. Manufaktura Square.

paradox that a private area is now the city's main public square. It also remains unclear how the Manufaktura Square will impact the development of the Old Town Square. Since the new square actually took over the functions of the old one, the possibility of developing the Old Town area becomes doubtful. Finally, lack of a direct pedestrian connection between these two squares is also unfortunate (fig. 3).



### **Old Town Park – reconstructing or creating history?**

The Old Town Park (Staromiejski) is one of the most important social spaces in this part of the city. A frequent choice for walks and meetings, it is a truly integrating, common space. The park was established in the 1950s and designed by Kazimierz Chrableski.<sup>4</sup> It was built at the site of a dense urban quarter that had been partly demolished in 1941 and turned into a ghetto. Classically composed, the park's alleys are axial and symmetrical, the design complemented with a playground, a fountain and some sculptures, notably including an installation by Andrzej Jocz in the form of an interesting sundial. Another important spot in the park is the pond on the river Łódka, much liked by the residents and often visited.

The modern revalorization of the park is holistic and comprehensive<sup>5</sup>, almost completely changing its face. The most important design assumption was to refer to its pre-war history by indicating the pre-war layout of streets and outlines of buildings, for example through a new arrangement of greenery and alleys. The lines of pre-war buildings will be reflected by hedges. Some historical references go even further as there are plans to reconstruct two gates that once led to the Eljasz Karo Market.

New viewing axes as well as novel attractions and recreational spaces will be also introduced, including a playground divided into zones for children in different age groups, an open-air gym, and a boulodrome.

Thus, a new-old park is to be created, enriched with historical references. Still, such infantilization of history stirs controversy. Objections are also raised by the significant volume of non-green recreational spaces (amphitheater, playgrounds) (Mowszowicz 1962), especially since plans for the redevelopment of both the Old Town Square and the Old Town Park were not subject to broader social consultations.

### **Plac Wolności – park or square?**

Plac Wolności [Liberty Square] was created at the time of the city's industrial development. In 1823, south of the Old Town, a new axis was marked out in the direction of Piotrkowska Street. The New Town was built on the other bank of the river Łódka. With a large, octagonal square called the "New Town Square" at the center, it is located ca 450 meters from the Old Town Square, at the intersection of the main north-south axis and the Średnia [Middle] Street. New representative buildings were developed there, including the New Town Hall and the Evangelical Church, followed in later years by a school (today's Archaeological and Ethnographical Museum) and tenement houses. In 1930, a monument to Kościuszko was erected at the center of the square. A market square for many decades, it later became an important transport hub, mainly for trams. Traffic was organized in a circle, with an island at the center, featuring the monument. Piotrkowska Street – the main axis of the city – runs southward from the square. In the 1990s, its significant part was changed into a promenade for pedestrians.

Currently, Plac Wolności is being reconstructed, new plans involving complete transformation of the area. Tram traffic is to be shifted to the north, where the tram tracks will be laid in a semi-circle, while the southern part of the square will be turned into a pedestrian zone, including

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4 Park Staromiejski (Old Town Park), <http://www.zielonalodz.pl/parki.php?park=staromiejski>.

5 <https://rewitalizacja.uml.lodz.pl/dzialania/4-okolice-placu-wolnosci-i-starego-rynku/park-staromiejsk>

“sixty-four trees, each ca eight meters high (maples and pears), along with perennials, decorative grass and thousands of shrubs. In the southern part of the square (with an area of nearly 1,200 square meters) turfs of durable grass species will be planted, creating a miniature park where one will be able to take a breath in the greenery<sup>6</sup>

As mentioned above, one of the problems with transforming public space in Poland concerns the overuse of concrete. Fortunately, in the case of Plac Wolności the situation is different since much of its surface is to be covered with greenery. Visualizations show almost a forest-like area in the southern part. Although creation of green spaces in the city center can be perceived as positive, there are certain issues that need consideration:

- creating green areas in a place that has never been green before,
- creating a new communication system, which is expensive because tram tracks need to be removed,
- blocking the view of Piotrkowska and Nowomiejska Street with trees, which involves covering the main historical axis of the city,
- obscuring architectural monuments with trees at the frontage of the square.

These decisions definitely change and distort the historical landscape of the square and the streets leading from it. Further, the area is not far from greenery since a large park is located several hundred meters to the north: the Staromiejski Park, which is also undergoing revitalization. These arguments were formulated by associations of architects and art historians, who also mention problems with religious processions entering the Church of the Holy Spirit in the southern part of the square (the former Evangelical Church) since a part of the route will lead through greenery. However, these doubts were not addressed by city officials (fig. 4).

### **Plac Dąbrowskiego – one revitalization after another**

The Dąbrowski Square is a special case for several reasons. The currently planned revitalization arises from the need to “fix the mistakes” of the previous intervention. However, it was the first revitalization that followed the inhabitants’ voice as they voted for the project online.<sup>7</sup>

In order to understand this space, it is essential to learn about its history. In the nineteenth century, the Dąbrowski Square served a practical function. For many years it was the location of a brick warehouse, and its first name was actually “Brick Square”. This began to change in the twentieth century, when plans were made to turn it into a monumental complex with public facilities. The new, representative square was to meet the modernization ambitions of the city authorities. In the years 1927–1930, the District Court was built (designed by the architect J. Kaban-Korski), the space of the square was tidied up, alleys with benches were laid out and electric lighting replaced the gas installation (Stefański & Ciarkowski, 2018).

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6 <https://lodz.pl/artikul/rewitalizacja-placu-wolnosci-remont-trwa-widac-juz-zarys-nowego-projektu-zdjecia-55314/>.

7 <https://vox.uml.lodz.pl/glosowania/jak-bedzie-wygladal-nowy-plac-dabrowskiego/vid,120,m>.





Fig. 4. Manufaktura Square

After the Second World War, the reconstruction of the square was continued. For example, a monumental theater was built, dominating over this part of the city. A representative yet lively space was created, with a fountain, greenery and benches. In addition, a large transport hub was organized at one of the square's frontages.

The square, which had not been renovated for many years, required urgent modernization at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, instead of repairing the paving, it was decided to completely change this well-functioning space. In 2009, the square was stripped of greenery and concreted, making the place empty. A new fountain was installed, shaped like two sea waves, causing particular controversy owing to its vaginal shape (Magnuszewska, 2016). The original design of the fountain had a more complex and higher structure with more waves. Due to the changes introduced in the realization, the designer of the fountain no longer wants to be identified with it and waived copyright.

Currently, another modernization of the Dąbrowski Square is planned, with the aim to help the residents to regain this space. According to the architectural concept, the fountain is to be demolished, instead introducing pavilions such as flower shops and small gastronomy in this area. The goal is to create a pleasant space that is not necessarily representative or monumental. Three concepts were developed, all of them making greenery the most important factor. They

differ only in the volume of vegetation. In an online vote, held between 16 and 27 December 2022, residents chose the greenest concept<sup>8</sup> (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Dąbrowski Square.

### **Woonerf – a street for living?**

The Dutch term *woonerf* means “a street for living.” First investments of this type date back to the 1970s and were made in the Netherlands. The idea of *woonerf* is to transform a street to redefine its communication function by giving priority to pedestrians and cyclists as well as providing benches, bicycle racks, playgrounds, trees and lawns along the street. *Woonerf* is a public space that combines the functions of a street, a promenade, a parking lot and a meeting place for residents. *Woonerfs* are popular not only in the Netherlands, but also in Scandinavia and Germany.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Plac Dąbrowskiego (Dąbrowski Square), <https://lodz.pl/artypkul/plac-dabrowskiego-lodzianie-zdecydowali-jak-bedzie-wygladal-wizualizacje-54843/>.

9 <https://www.muratorplus.pl/inwestycje/inwestycje-publiczne/woonerf-w-polsce-powstaje-kolejny-woonerf-textorial-park-ii-aa-ibaz-BCns-1G3q.html>.

Łódź was one of the first Polish cities where woonerfs began to be created. Changes were first signaled by the gradual transformation of Piotrkowska Street into a pedestrian zone, which began in 1992. The first woonerf was created in 2014 in 6 Sierpnia Street out of the initiative of its residents, who submitted the project to the city's civic budget.<sup>10</sup> Also, one of the streets leading from Piotrkowska to the city's main train station (Łódź Fabryczna) was pedestrianized, its vehicle traffic limited.

In the years 2014–2023, 23 woonerfs were built, with more works currently underway to transform further streets. Most of the woonerfs were built in the city center, although not in its main, tourist part, but in the Stare Polesie District. Located west of the city center, it features mostly tenement houses from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It also lacked parks or public greenery, which means that the introduction of green streets has undoubtedly improved not only aesthetic qualities but also the residents' quality of life.

On the other hand, however, creation of woonerfs has led to problems. One of them concerns difficulties with communication in the city center. Following complete or partial limitation of traffic in certain streets, no new underground car parks were created. As a result, moving around the city center by car is now very difficult. There are plans to improve the city's public transport by introducing more trams and ecological buses, but currently the center of Łódź is one of the most congested areas in Poland.

Another factor is the lack of social revitalization. One characteristic feature of cities in communist countries was the settlement of immigrant, rural, lower class and often criminal people in the centers of cities. In order to eradicate social inequalities, former luxurious tenement houses were inhabited by a mixed population. What followed in Łódź was the degradation of large parts of the city center. Unfortunately, creation of new streets and woonerfs was not accompanied by changes in the structure of residents, often leading to the destruction of new infrastructure, which was not treated with respect: benches were destroyed, and flowerbeds littered. This confirms that the city's authorities have failed to achieve social revitalization.

One of the recent projects is the reconstruction of Moniuszko Street, one of the most charming streets in the center of Łódź despite being only ca 300 meters long. It was built in 1885 as a private street with villas and palaces by the manufacturer Meyer and was consequently called "Meyer's Passage" for a long time. The entire architectural ensemble is an interesting complex of exclusive architecture from the end of the nineteenth century. The recent urban implementation aims to revive the street by creating a new media library and restaurants. Since most historic buildings in the street house various institutions, there will probably be few problems with local residents. Such revitalization is perceived as positive, although the state of preservation of the YMCA building from the 1930s and a multitude of minor imperfections are still troubling (fig. 6 and 7).

## **Conclusions**

Over the last two decades, Polish cities have undergone significant transformations, which particularly intensified after Poland's accession to the European Union. European funds allowed for significant investments and transformation of city centers in Poland. Most of these changes

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10 <https://lodz.pl/arttykul/woonerfy-w-lodzi-powstalo-ich-kilkadziesiat-a-w-planach-kolejne-zdjecia-54230/>.





Fig. 6. Woonerf Moniuszki.

have been positive, the funds helping to move traffic out of city centers, restore historical objects and monuments as well as introduce more greenery.

Despite the positive reception of these changes and urban renewal, the specifics of these processes are criticized by specialists and considered controversial. Solutions are analyzed in terms of urban planning, city landscape and ecology. Since these spaces are still relatively young (or are still being modernized), it is difficult to evaluate them unequivocally. However, it is worth to ask questions and start a discussion on whether such solutions can be considered modern and adequate to the requirements of planning in the twenty-first century. Issues such as the social functioning of space (lack of participation or too much of it) remain particularly important, along with the overuse of concrete, superficial historical reconstructions, and the Disneyfication of space.

One of the important negative factors is the avoidance of applicable norms. Despite the law, regulations concerning conservation issues, for example, are often not implemented. This leads to arbitrary decisions made by local and state authorities, which more and more often make them with disregard for the law and expert opinions. It is necessary to emphasize this problem as it is intensifying and deeply affecting public spaces in Polish cities. It is important that circles of conservators, urban





Fig. 7. Woonerf Moniuszki.

planners, architects and art historians notice the risks involved and publicize this issue. Some of the legal regulations could be also amended. In view of these emerging trials, revitalization processes will certainly challenge experts in the near future, demanding serious discussion.

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The authors were equally involved in the creation and writing of the text.

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