

ISSN 2081-4461  
e-ISSN 2449-9781

NR 20  
(2020)

# BIBLIOTEKA REGIONALISTY REGIONAL JOURNAL

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## A VITAL CITY AND REVITALIZATION PROCESSES

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### MIASTO WITALNE A PROCESY REWITALIZACJI

DOI: 10.15611/br.2020.1.03

JEL Classification: O18, R11, R58

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*Quote as:* Hajduga, P. (2020). A vital city and revitalization processes. *Biblioteka Regionalisty. Regional Journal*, (20).

**Abstract:** Polish urban centres have been going to great lengths to reactivate the vitality of space, community, economy, and the environment in recent years. The term ‘revitalization’ is used in a broad sense that is adapted to the roots of the problems considered most acute in a given territorial unit. At the same time, it could seem that, in many cases, the measures taken focus on rather superficial issues related to image or on remedying the noticeable symptoms of the problems. What becomes a central challenge is the redefinition of the operating mechanism of a city, i.e. the mechanism where various processes are in harmony with each other, the actions taken by local entities are characterized by synergy, competition for resources is rationalized, and the operation of the entire system is determined by original and creative development directions which integrate local entities and include the city into the network of ties with the surroundings. The detailed discussions described in this paper concern the vital city and urban space revitalization processes.

**Keywords:** revitalization, vital city, urban space.

**Streszczenie:** Polskie ośrodki miejskie czynią w ostatnich latach intensywne starania na rzecz reaktywowania witalności przestrzeni, społeczności, gospodarki czy też środowiska. Pojęcia rewitalizacji używa się w sposób bardzo szeroki, dostosowany do podłoża problemów, które w danej jednostce terytorialnej są uznawane za najbardziej odczuwalne. Jednocześnie można odnieść wrażenie, że w wielu przypadkach podejmowane działania koncentrują się na dość powierzchownych kwestiach wizerunko-

wych bądź na usuwaniu zauważalnych symptomów problemów. Do rangi pierwszoplanowego wyzwania urasta ponowne zdefiniowanie mechanizmu funkcjonowania miasta, tj. mechanizmu, w którym współgrają ze sobą rozmaite procesy, działania podejmowane przez podmioty lokalne cechuje synergia, zracjonalizowana zostaje konkurencja o zasoby, a funkcjonowanie całego systemu wyznaczone jest przez oryginalne i kreatywne kierunki rozwoju integrujące podmioty lokalne oraz włączające miasto w sieć powiązań z otoczeniem. Zawarte w artykule szczegółowe rozważania dotyczą miasta witalnego i procesów rewitalizacji przestrzeni miejskich.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rewitalizacja, miasto witalne, przestrzeń miejska.

## 1. Introduction

The modern form and nature of the socioeconomic space of Polish urban centres is characterized by high dynamics of change. On the one hand, these are growth and development dynamics which manifest themselves in the establishment of urban areas and an increasing urban density. On the other hand, these are destruction dynamics arising from the winding-up of industrial facilities, migration and depopulation of certain territorial units, as well as the surging spatial chaos. What becomes one of the essential civilization challenges are the processes of restoring the vitality of the degraded resources of the development and the areas of disfunction. The urban centres subject to the revitalization process regain their “vital forces” and new development opportunities, and challenges arise. Urban vitality is a set of functional and spatial, social and cultural, as well as economic features the synergy of which creates an added value for a unit. The ongoing process of globalization, in turn, is reflected in spatial and cultural standardization accompanied by the disappearance of the local and regional characteristics of urban areas. The architectural and spatial uniformity of urban centres and the non-existence of the effective protection of the cultural heritage result in the specific local nature of a space fading away (Twardzik and Wrana, 2017, p. 11). By definition, the revitalization process is meant to oppose these trends and contribute to the preservation of the cultural heritage as well as to the functional use of unoccupied buildings and degraded areas with a view to new urban functions and new jobs (Paszkowski, 2014). Consequently, revitalization becomes a process of renewal rather than the repair of territorial units. Hence, a vital city is characterized by organized space, an efficient local economy, environmental assets, availability of transport, availability of social and commercial services, specific architectural characteristics, and local cultural identity. The potential for the vitality of an urban centre is, therefore, a set of various assets referring to the quality of life, the conditions in which enterprises operate, and the natural environment (Twardzik and Wrana, 2017, p. 11).

This paper aims to determine the symptoms and causes which conditioned the loss of vitality by Polish cities, and in particular to identify and organize the problems underlying the revitalization process.

The study applied the desktop research method and an analysis of programming documents and working materials referring to the progress of works on concepts of revitalization in selected territorial units. This allowed to determine, against the chosen definitions of revitalization, the real framework and directions of this process in selected urban centres. As a result of the research, conclusions were drawn about the perception of vitality of the cities where fundamental changes were being introduced.

## 2. The notion and essence as well as objectives of revitalization

The term ‘revitalization’ describes a complex process the progress of which depends on numerous factors. This term best captures both the nature of changes and the essence of the process itself. The Latin word *vitalis* means “of life, able to live, life-giving, worth living”, and the prefix *re* means “again, anew, once more” (Kumaniecki, 1982, pp. 420, 540). English has three equivalent terms for this notion: revitalization, urban renewal, and urban redevelopment. Their closer semantic analysis allows the first one, revitalization, to be treated as a broader term, encompassing not only urban space (Czaja, 2018, p. 66).

The term ‘revitalization’ is usually used with reference to some territorial units, which, as an effect of transformations, mainly business, social, but also economic ones, were subject to degradation since they had lost their original function and purpose completely or partly.

In the discussions on socio-economic geography (Table 1), in particular in the context of industrial wasteland, revitalization is defined as a complex repair process concerning a given degraded urban space, as part of which other than traditional, i.e. new functions are introduced to the destroyed, ‘dead’, fabric of a territorial unit (Kaczmarek, 2001, pp. 22-23). The aim of the measures taken in this process is to ensure harmonious and sustainable development through the adaptation and proper development of a given area with the changing needs of its inhabitants in mind. The objectives of revitalization include: improvement of the conditions of living and working in an urban centre, restoration of spatial governance, economic recovery of a given area, as well as protection and preservation of old, often being the heritage, fabric of a city. As a result of these actions, the functional and spatial structure of the destroyed areas changes (Boryczka, 2019, p. 146).

Additionally, in light of socioeconomic geography, four dimensions of the revitalization process are revealed (Table 2). Each of the dimensions has certain features enabling the determination of its significance in the entire transformation process.

In the face of the complexity of the problems and structure of a territorial unit, revitalization should be perceived as a long-term process referring to various spheres of the functioning of an urban centre at the same time. From this point of view the relevant literature distinguishes social, economic, cultural, and spatial revitalization (Table 3).

**Table 1.** Types of revitalization analysed from the viewpoint of socioeconomic geography

Types	Description
Implantation	Consists in introducing new spatial functions and forms to the degraded area. These measures are taken and determined outside the area itself. What is also significant is the assumption that the direct recipients of the new space will be newcomers, while local residents will benefit from the introduced changes only indirectly “through the emergence of new services the users of which they might become, or the coming into existence of a place that is better and more interesting in terms of urban landscape aesthetics”
Integration	Similar to implantation revitalization. The fundamental difference is, however, the inclusion to the decision-making process and the transformations themselves of the local community. The effect of the actions taken should be improvement of inhabitants’ lives, creation of new jobs, and possibility to acquire new qualifications by the present residents. In this sense, as is emphasized by specialists, revitalization is not only a process of functional and spatial transformations but also a much broader and more complex socioeconomic process

Source: own work based on (Kaczmarek, 2001, p. 27).

**Table 2.** Dimensions of revitalization

Dimensions	Description
Spatial	Emphasizes the visible elements of the revitalization process, including in particular urban composition, new development, and newly created quality of urban space
Social	Emphasizes that people are an extremely important element of revitalization, since it is them who are both direct recipients of the new space and originators of the process. In the revitalization process, people play a double role in the social dimension: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• on the one hand, they participate in decision-making processes, from planning, to goal determination, to implementation method, to performance (they constitute the so-called external community or revitalization process originators);</li> <li>• on the other hand, these are local residents, who are directly subjected to the effects of the measures taken</li> </ul>
Economic	Emphasizes that the objective of revitalization is to improve the existing economic and social situation. An element of this process is a partial or complete change of the functional structure. Frequently, economic activities (e.g. industrial ones) pursued earlier are replaced by modern disciplines from the sector of services, which are readily located in new spaces
Cultural	Emphasizes that revitalization is a process of adapting the existing urban fabric to the new ongoing needs of residents with the simultaneous preservation of the physical evidence of the past development stage of a city

Source: own work based on (Kaczmarek, 2001, pp. 45-49, 51-52).

**Table 3.** Types of revitalization

Types	Description
Social	Concentrated on the local community and improvement of their socioeconomic situation, related to creating human capital. An important task of social revitalization is to form a favourable “mental climate” among the communities of the cities under revitalization. What is particularly significant is acceptance of the actions and joint participation of residents themselves as well as entrepreneurs and city users. By influencing mentality, forming or referring to the system of values and attitudes of people, it is possible to achieve specific objectives of revitalization concerning changes of the social structure, preservation of the cultural heritage, reduction of the pauperization process of society, as well as exclusion and social pathologies.
Economic	Actions aimed at an economic recovery of an urban centre or its part, connected with the improvement of the operating effectiveness or change of the purpose of selected areas. It concerns actions related to economic transformations of a city, i.e. referring to the restructuring of economic entities and their institutional environment, changes of organizational, production, and spatial links between individual participants of the economic life of a territorial unit. It also consists in a change in managing production factor resources, including in particular a rational consumption of exhaustible resources, introduction of modern production and organization techniques. Hence, the essence of the process is the reconstruction of the economic base of the city centre, i.e. exogenic and endogenic types of the economic activity pursued in a city.
Cultural	Concentrates on preserving traditions, protecting the cultural and physical heritage of a territorial unit.
Spatial	Concerns transformations of the urban composition, architecture, and its special assets, as well as improvement of the quality of the space of a city, related to introducing a broadly defined spatial governance, changing the development method of selected areas, restoring proper relations between the economy and the natural environment. The qualitative changes occurring in the revitalization process concern interference with the physical structure of an urban centre. The introduced architectural and urban transformations, new projects are supposed to add a new value to the preserved resources of the physical capital. The actions taken regard, among others, rehabilitation and restoration, a new adaptation of heritage industrial, retail or residential buildings, but also removal of the decapitalized development and construction of new facilities and complexes. Thus, spatial transformations in territorial units and improvement of the quality of their public and semi-public spaces influence the image of a city.

Source: own work based on (Godlewska-Majkowska, 2008, pp. 146-147).

There are also two principal approaches to the object of revitalization that deserve to be mentioned. One is people-based initiatives (PBI) (Andersson, 2006, p. 793), defined as actions intended to help people who, as a result of exclusion processes, poverty concentration, and stigmatization of poor districts, cannot compete in the labour market and who will not be able to return to the labour market on their own.

The other approach is area-based initiatives (ABI), defined as actions aimed in particular to improve the construction and natural environment of urban crisis areas, competitiveness of the area as a location of enterprises, and quality of residents' lives (Jadach-Sepiolo, 2017, pp. 30-32).

Skalski considers revitalization to be “[...] a comprehensive programme of renovation, modernization of the development and public spaces, revalorization of heritage structures in a selected area, usually an old district of a city, in connection with the economic and social development. Revitalization is a combination of technical actions, such as renovations, with economic recovery programmes and actions for solving the social problems occurring in such areas employment, crime, and demographic imbalance” (Skalski, 2010, p. 10). This is an interesting approach, yet it does not exhaust all the possible ways of comprehending the forms of functional revitalization understood in dynamic terms. Revitalization might also be considered as determining new functions for areas which had lost the earlier meaning of this kind and change of the previous functions, as well as the creation of a completely new socioeconomic space (Czaja, 2018, p. 67).

In connection with coming into force of the first Act on Revitalization in Poland, a statutory definition of this term was introduced in 2015. In accordance with this Act, “revitalization is a process of driving the degraded areas’ recovery from the state of crisis, pursued comprehensively, through integrated actions for the local community, space, and economy, concentrated in a given territory, taken by revitalization stakeholders based on a ‘gmina’ revitalization programme” (Ustawa z dnia 9 października 2015).

Socioeconomic practice readily uses the legal definition that revitalization actions may cover the ‘gmina’ (commune) area in a state of crisis due to an excessive concentration of negative social phenomena (in particular unemployment, poverty, crime, low level of education or social capital) as well as an insufficient level of participation of its inhabitants in public and cultural life, and the occurrence of various negative phenomena in the economic, environmental, spatial and functional, and technical spheres (Ustawa z dnia 9 października 2015).

The very meaning of the notion of revitalization, the essence, and purposes of this process are quite commonly misunderstood in Poland (Dąbrowski, 2012, p. 26). Usually, revitalization is wrongly referred to implementing single measures related to the renewal (revalorization) of heritage complexes. It is mistakenly believed that revitalization is equivalent to the renovation of heritage structures and consists in renovation and maintenance work. The incorrect understanding of the essence of revitalization has led to many practical misunderstandings. This is because local governments expect financial support for renovation undertakings without recovering the local functions connected with it. In this regard, the presented projects often lack serious ideas (Czaja, 2018, p. 69).

The concept of multifunctional revitalization *pro future* is not very common and is not understood well at the level of local communities and local governments

in Poland. This is the result of many years of the absence of local government traditions in Poland, the awareness of the possibility to shape one's surroundings, and the appropriate knowledge, imagination, and motivation. Laying the foundations of self-governance in the early 1990s did not facilitate the establishment of "little homelands" either. Subsequent years brought an improvement in the functioning of local government administration without, however, tightening the relations between inhabitants and the space in which they live. It was not until recently that elements of deeper awareness with this respect occurred, not fostered by an excessive politicization of the local and self-government activity (Czaja, 2018, p. 69).

The notion of revitalization, which used to be limited to the renewal of single degraded urban areas, have currently become the basic instrument of the policy of local development oriented towards both the physical and social resources of cities. This is because the times when the development of cities was determined by the location of the big industry and large-scale residential areas are gone. Spatial planning has returned to the areas which were developed in the past and by now have been inhabited for a long time. The point is to restructure, renew, stabilize, and consolidate them. It is these areas and the local communities residing there, who are capable of innovativeness and are well-educated, that will decide on the future development of cities, which is understood primarily as qualitative development (Dąbrowski, 2012, p. 28).

### 3. Vitality of a city

The notion of a 'vital city' might be identified with the capability of an urban centre and its residents of a permanent, sustainable, multidimensional development, where the critical role is played by the use of creativity and innovativeness (Landry, 2000).

The attributes of a vital city include (Wrana, 2018, p. 30):

- developmental continuity, which is based on the multiplied energy and ingenuity of inhabitants;
- wealth of opportunities enabling local entities to pursue their own aspirations, while at the same time attracting new entities from the environment to an urban centre;
- favourable conditions for the networking of entities, flow of information, idea, joint implementation of projects;
- multifaceted consistency and synergy of entities, functions, spaces;
- a specific 'genetic code' enabling the preservation of the values and functions that are crucial for a city;
- capability of generating and controlling creative 'mutations' introducing qualitative changes which enable the creation of a new configuration of the key values and functions to an urban centre and its community;

- capability of adapting to the changes occurring in the surroundings;
- minimization of the phenomena of marginalization of social groups and urban spaces.

Such an approach permits the deduction that vitality requires the following to be combined in local development processes: sustainability, creativity, and various aspects of cooperation, the result of which is multidimensional development.

When analysing the vitality of a city against the revitalization processes, it is worth indicating the symptoms of the loss of vitality (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Signs of loss of vitality of a city

Symptoms	Manifestations
Disappearing city-forming activities and functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• declining high-order services</li> <li>• low rank of cultural events</li> <li>• functional impoverishment of the city centre and districts</li> </ul>
Limited activity of residents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• low level of entrepreneurial activity</li> <li>• low level of social activity</li> <li>• decreased sense of responsibility for a city among its residents</li> <li>• intensifying entitlement attitudes</li> </ul>
Low interest in the city among investors	
Lack of public projects; budget allocation to ad-hoc problems and social problem solving	
Loss of potential regarding social and human capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• emigration of human capital</li> <li>• unfavourable changes in the age structure</li> <li>• decrease in the level of relational capital – low social consistency of a city (ghettos)</li> </ul>
Economic decline and its consequences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• loss of the city’s fiscal potential</li> <li>• loss of jobs</li> </ul>
Degradation of space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• decrease in aesthetics, lack of maintenance and modernization actions</li> <li>• degradation of infrastructure</li> <li>• ‘ghettoization’ of space</li> </ul>
Loss of real property value	

Source: own work based on (Twardzik and Wrana, 2017, pp. 11-12).

The decreased level of vitality of an urban centre might be evidenced also by the emergence of troublesome surpluses, i.e.:

- domination of the city centre by financial and business activities;
- relative growth in the significance of residential functions (e.g. a ‘bedroom suburb’);
- increase in the level of crime or pathological phenomena.



The existence of the abovementioned signs of loss of vitality might be caused by highly diversified factors and processes (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Factors and processes of the loss of vitality by cities

Causes	Manifestations
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• changes in the economic situation and competitive relations on the national or global scale</li> <li>• economic problems of the centres with which the city and its enterprises are tied with special relations</li> <li>• collapse of the dominant economic branch determining the labour market and subcontractor networks</li> <li>• exhaustion of local raw materials</li> </ul>
Transformations of social and human capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• frustration and dissatisfaction of inhabitants with the city development process, resulting in migration behaviours</li> <li>• reduced social integration caused by economic and migration factors (immigration and emigration)</li> <li>• low entrepreneurial potential of residents</li> <li>• residents' qualifications inadequate to the needs of the modern economy:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– low or very narrowly specialized education of the population, inadequate to the needs of the labour market</li> <li>– lack of interest in improving and updating qualifications among residents</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• exhaustion of the capacity of the natural environment – disproportions between environmental capabilities and the intensity of the development of settlement or economic functions</li> <li>• transformations of water circulation system in certain areas</li> <li>• impact of the natural force majeure: natural disasters or climate changes</li> </ul>
Financial and city management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• unsuccessful local government or business investment projects</li> <li>• negligence in planning the development of the environmental dimension</li> <li>• short-term approach to the local policy and strengthening of the current development method without opening to the future</li> <li>• shortage of the skills of quick adaptation to new conditions by enterprises, local government, inhabitants</li> <li>• weakening of the competitive position of the city:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– decrease in the significance of the functions fulfilled by the city</li> <li>– quicker development of neighbouring centres</li> </ul> </li> <li>• disproportions between various local functions</li> <li>• loss of an external source of funding</li> </ul>

Source: own work based on (Twardzik and Wrana, 2017, pp. 12-13).

Building a vital city, when considered in the context of revitalization, requires an approach intending to create new values, introduce radical changes, and an

innovative look at the potentials held. What is critical for reinforcing the vitality of an urban centre is the interdependent mutually driven development of diverse functions, which draws its power from the activity and creativity of local entities (Twardzik and Wrana, 2017, p. 13).

#### **4. Conclusion**

From among numerous insightful issues regarding the development of cities, the significance of spatial transformation and its multi-layer impact deserves to be noted. In most general terms, it could be said that space quality, in the aesthetic dimension, determines the perception of a territorial unit and is an important indicator of its image. Urban centres with degraded architecture, disturbed spatial governance, visible wasteland, and neglected unattractive public spaces cannot be associated with vital cities. However, apart from the aesthetics, it is important to create such characteristics in the space of a territorial unit as to make it more dynamic, surprising, and intriguing for both visitors and inhabitants. Such an effect is achieved by introducing cultural activities to the public space. It is also one of the directions of revitalization where historical and cultural heritage intertwines with modern culture. It is also worth opening up Polish urban centres to new bold architecture, and thus becoming a testimony of their times to a greater extent. This is how the openness of a city to unconventional ideas and solutions can be manifested. Nevertheless, it is essential to hand over the spaces of territorial units to local communities. Public spaces should attract the inhabitants and, in urban centres, contribute to changing conservative attitudes, which are typical of societies of the industrial era. This means that space should not be 'monumental', instead it should be an active element of the urban reality with a high value of its use for residents and visitors. The permeation of real and virtual spaces also needs to be pointed out. For a large number of territorial unit users, real space has its value only when it ensures free access to virtual space. The success in the transformation of space could be one of significant factors in solving the problem of declining urban centres and of their suburbanization (Wrana, 2018, pp. 47, 48).

A modern city must be a place where local and global values meet, concentrating creative potential, and a space for dialogue and the transfer of ideas. It is definitely impossible to outline one universal model of city development. The only certain thing is the emergence of new phenomena which will undermine the current development models and pose challenges for urban policy-making.

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