

Public Space in Medium-sized Town – Role in Development Policyⁱ

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1. Medium-sized towns – their place in process of system transition

Poland - compared to Europe - is a relatively poorly urbanized country. The process of urbanization in the country has been determined by the specificity of culture, which throughout the Middle Ages and almost half of the twentieth century was landowning and rural. The formed network of towns was matching the needs of agricultural economy and rural settlement. This network has been modified under the influence of innovation coming from the West, and the social, economic and cultural functions and legal solutions, which allowed distinction of inhabitants of the cities as a social group (Gieysztor, 1994). The growth of urban population was in the 60s and 70s, caused first of all jobs located in newly built factories (Szafrńska 2008). However, constantly most of the population of Poland remains “non-metropolitan” (Tab. 1).

	year			
	1995	2000	2005	2010
population of Poland in total	38.609.399	38.253.955	38.157.055	38.200.037
urban population	23.876.667	23.659.690	23.423.740	23.264.383
ratio	61,84%	61,85%	61,39%	60,90%
population of cities > 100.000	11.275.064	11.204.400	11.059.584	10.940.879
ratio to population in total	29,20%	29,29%	28,98%	28,64%
ratio to urban population	47,22%	47,36%	47,22%	47,03%
population of medium-sized towns	10.662.853	10.432.343	10.350.202	10.270.558
ratio to population in total	27,62%	27,27%	27,13%	26,89%
ratio to urban population	44,66%	44,09%	44,19%	44,15%

Tab. 1. Share of urban population in the country's population.
Source: Own composition based on Local Data Bank (2012)

Medium-sized townsⁱⁱ, considered in strictly demographic context, are home to almost 27% of Polish population counted in total, and more than 44% of urban population (Tab. 1). In majority, they also provide a service base for residents of nearby villages and small towns. This factor was also an important reason for raising the vast majority of them to the status of capital of powiat in 1999 – reintroduced second level of territorial administration. Local governments in Poland were reborn in 1990, but the second stage of administrative reform introduced two further levels of local government: the voivodeship – to become in the future become an important stakeholder of the EU regional policy and poviats – aimed at

strengthening the decentralization process and helping to rebuild a sense of local identity (Kulesza 2000).

Taking into account the statistical average from years 1995-2010ⁱⁱⁱ this group of towns was affected by population loss (Fig. 1), however the ratio of population in comparison to general population of Poland or urban population in total remains stable. Basing on criteria of population change medium sized towns can be divided to three types of cases:

- towns affected by rapid loss - caused by unemployment and low quality of life or on the contrary - gentrification
- stable towns – in which the falling industry has been replaced by new business, usually small and medium enterprises
- fast growing towns – located in suburbs of large city or associated to it with frequent rail connection.

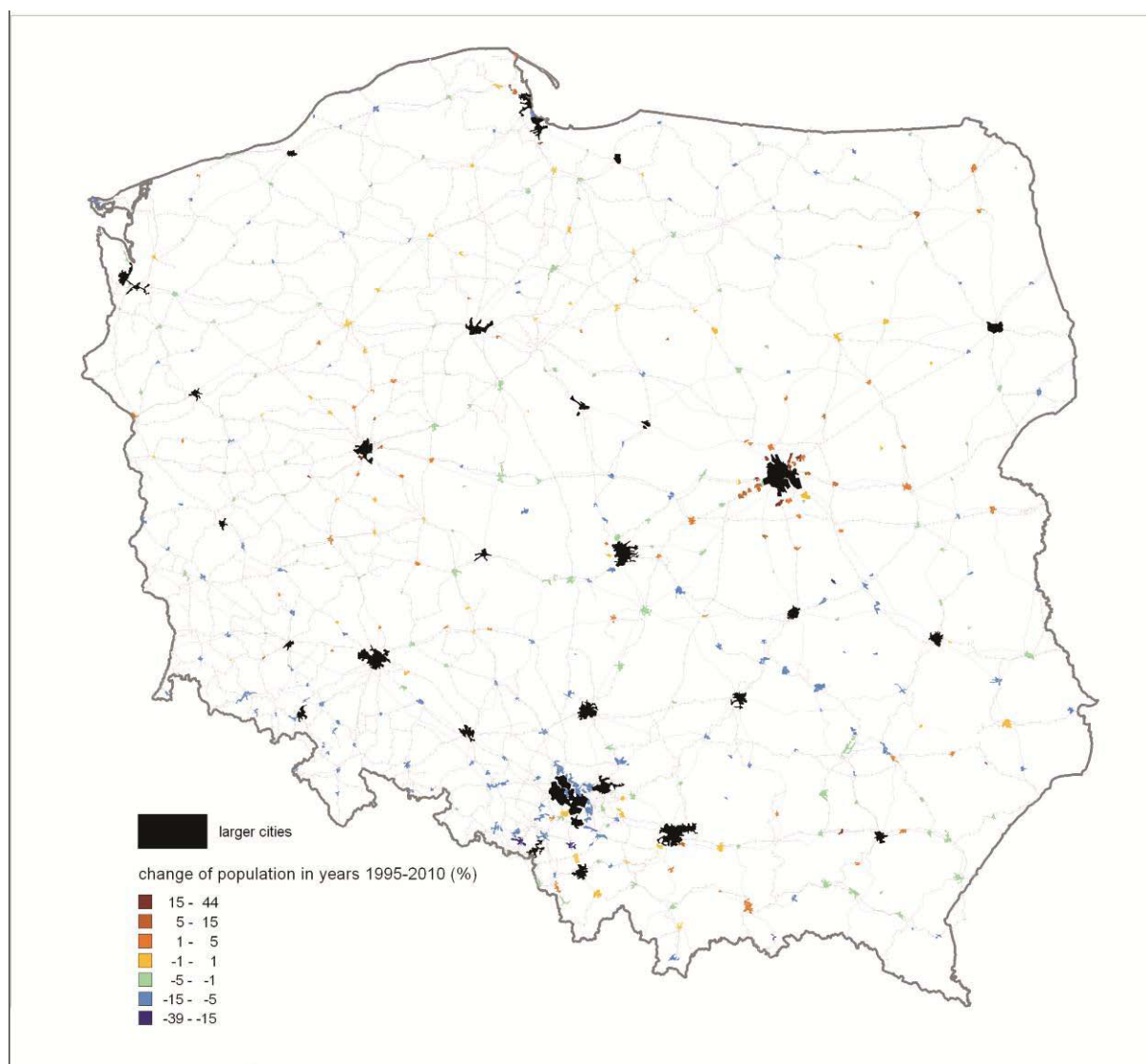


Figure 1. Change in population size medium-sized towns (%) in the years 1995 to 2010
Source: Own composition based on Local Data Bank (2012)

In spaces of Polish cities overlap numerous – mostly negative - phenomena resulting from principles and methods of implementation of the socialist urban planning model, and imposed upon it conditions resulting from the transformation - lack of institutional and mental capacity to maintain spatial order in conditions of market economy and decentralized

planning system (Kochanowski 1996, Węclawowicz 2007). Majority of studies on the nature of these processes primarily concern large centres, whilst the specificity of analysed group of towns remains a poorly recognized issue.

Medium-sized towns affected by the system transition much more strongly than large multi-purpose centres. The socialist model of economy was basing on large state-owned companies. After introducing the principles of market economy most of those companies collapsed or has undergone a reorganization resulting in a reduction of jobs. Among consequences of these changes was also elimination of social infrastructure maintained by public employers – kindergartens, libraries etc. Due to the concentration of human resources and potential customers, global employers preferred allocating their interests in large cities. This meant that after a sudden deceleration, medium-sized towns had to discover endogenous potentials, which enable them to lead a new path of development, self in conditions of self-government and limited external support.

2. Public space as endogenous potential

The actions taking place in public spaces of medium-sized towns are different than those in larger centres. Here, the squares, streets and parks remain the main meeting place and recreation area. This does not mean they do not require changes. A significant portion of public spaces are in poor technical condition and of low aesthetic and functional value. Such problems were caused due to their functional and physical fragmentation, and allocation for other competing uses such as infrastructural (car traffic) or commercial services. Despite these disadvantages the public spaces are still important places that focus local social and economic life of medium-sized towns. Nevertheless, this position will be increasingly challenged by new transformations of urban spaces of these towns, particularly development of new multi-functional shopping centres and theme parks. The issue of such competition may become relevant as medium-sized towns develop economically.

Paradoxically, slower speed of changes in smaller towns can help them to avoid mistakes which have been made in large centres. Values of their public spaces may also become helpful in overcoming existing backwardness. Aesthetically attractive and community integrating places can - thanks to the trend to preserve existing or reintroduce sense of local identity - become a tool to strengthen social and economic importance of medium-sized towns. According to B. Jałowicki and M.S. Szczepanski, *“rediscovering places, the renaissance of small communities listed in the domesticated space is intellectual and organizational response to the processes of concentration, centralization and standardization occurring in industrial and post-industrial societies”* (2005, p. 322). It is affected by discourage to the uniformity of “non-urbanity” (Lorens 2007) and also the growing popularity of sites of unique characteristics. According to T. Markowski, physical qualities of space play an important role in marketing position of smaller urban centres (2006). J. Gehl notes that as the car availability has increased, in public spaces optional activities began to dominate over necessary everyday activities. Demand for urban recreation is increasing, however - unlike the necessary activities – they will occur only if good quality is provided (Gehl 2006).

The results of the contest for the best managed public space in Poland, which is being organized since 2006, indicate that the authorities of many medium-sized towns seem to understand above mentioned circumstances and consistently improve the quality of public spaces. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that yet the esthetical, technical and functional conditions of public spaces in this group of towns is far is far from satisfactory.

3. Programming the development of public spaces

In the Polish legal system the term “area of public space” was introduced in the Law on spatial planning and development of 2003. However, due to the expensive planning procedures, which are associated with defining the space as “public”, in practice local authorities have rarely used such provision – open public places are named as areas of greenery or communication. This fact does not mean that municipalities have completely abandoned the long-term plans related to improving the quality of public spaces. Many local authorities have included development of public spaces in optional documents (development strategies and local revitalization programs) within the context of a wider program of solving social and economic problems.

Since the new financial opportunities related to the EU accession have occurred, the number of investments in renewal or creation of new public spaces has raised. The reasons for this situation can be traced in the increasing availability of Polish local governments to the resource of European best practices. Nevertheless, a very important factor for policy makers was the fact that public space does not affect competitive balance within the town - thus, investments in this element of urban pattern have higher ratio of refunding, than infrastructure oriented on generating profits. It should be emphasized that in conditions of the notion, promoted by the central authorities, that the ability to obtain the EU funds is a measure of the resourcefulness of local authorities, higher amount of subsidy ensured is preferable for PR reasons.

To the present day, the accessibility of the EU funds aimed at improving the quality of public space for Polish local governments can be divided into three main periods:

- Pre-Accession - financial support for exchange of knowledge, development of strategic documents, providing basic infrastructure
- 2004-2006 programming period - broad support for investments in urban space, however, within a single Integrated Regional Operational Programme for 2004-2006
- 2007-2013 programming period - broad support for investments in urban space within 16 Regional Operational Programmes for 2007-2013.

As already mentioned, development strategies and local regeneration programs are not required by Polish law, but their preparation facilitates benefit acquisition of the EU funding. The first programming period in Poland (2004-2006) was a test of new institutions and mechanisms, therefore, a broad scope of objectives and forms of planned projects planned projects has been tolerated. In the 2007-2013 period the importance of socio-economic development of cities were reinforced. Projects dedicated to urban areas were clearly divided into those relating to the comprehensive revitalization and oriented on tourism development. Therefore, municipalities have widely updated existing documents.

4. Case studies

The subject of case studies are five towns of the Pomorskie Voivodeship, which authorities put the quality of public space as an important conditioning of development policy. The cases differ in terms of spatial, economic and social conditions as well as motives of transformation of public spaces.

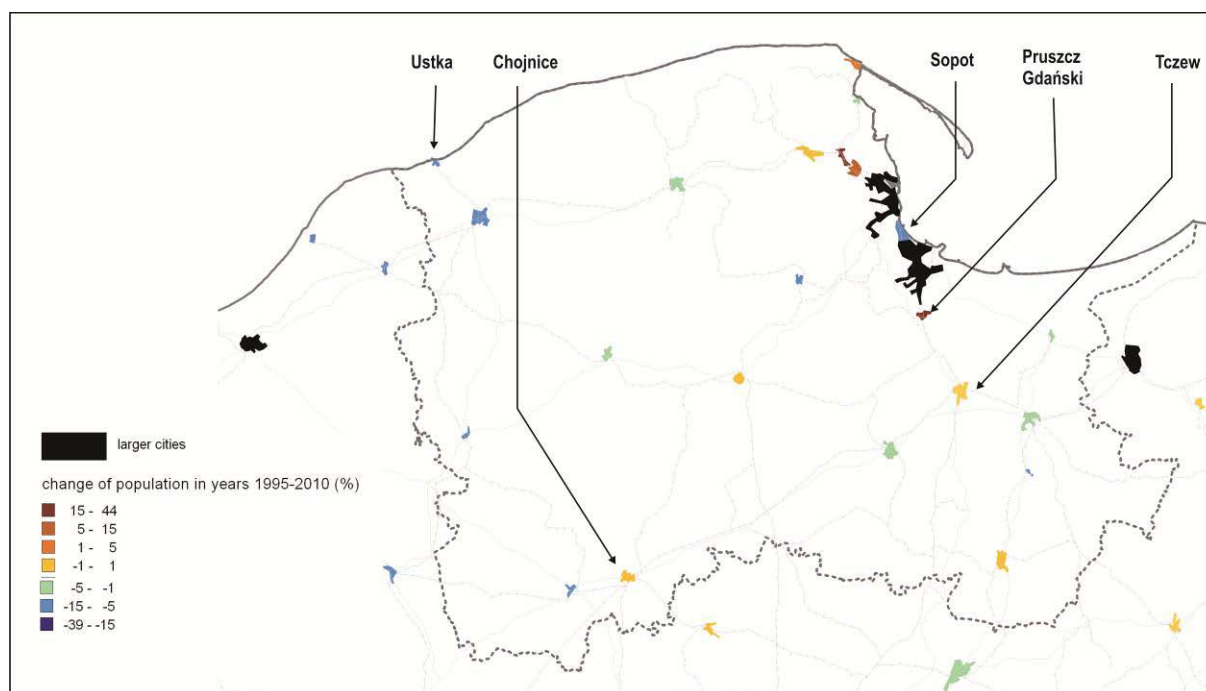


Figure 2. Change in population size medium-sized towns (%) of The Pomorskie Voivodeship in the years 1995 to 2010 with indication of towns, which are subject of case studies
Source: Own composition based on Local Data Bank (2012)

4.1. Tczew – new riverside identity

Tczew is a poviát capital with a stable population exceeding 60.000, which since mid-XIX century serves as an important railway junction. The town has been affected by a number of phenomena, which beget significant degradation of the role of the Old Town.

Before the transformation one of the main employers was the Polish Railway Company (PKP). Many residents, who lost jobs as a result of restructuring, have self-organized their new employment in services and small commerce. However, those functions were located primarily in the western part of the town, separated from the Old Town by the railway line. The loss of the current role of the historic centre has been influenced by location of large retail facilities on the outskirts of the town.

Apart from external factors, the degradation of the Old Town has been caused by major internal problems such as social pathologies and poor technical condition of public spaces and surrounding historic buildings.

In the mid-90s the local authorities have taken first steps to improve attractiveness of the centre, and also prevent progressing deurbanization. The purpose of the initial works was to improve the technical condition of streets and provide safe space for pedestrians. Later, the need to improve the quality of public spaces has found its place in the first local revitalization program (2004), and was upheld in its amendments of 2006 and 2009 as well as in the development strategy of 2008.

The plan was to improve the competitiveness of the Old Town (in relation to clusters of services and trade centres in peripheral districts) through development of facilities for culture and recreation in the whole riverside zone. In 1997-2002 the existing cultural centre has been renovated, and in 2004-2007 the Regional Exhibition Centre of Lower Vistula "Arts Factory" has been created. While the infrastructure of culture has been developed primarily on the historic fabric of the Old Town, the surrounding open spaces were gradually adapted for recreational purposes. In 1999 the municipal park has been modernized, however the key investment – construction of the Vistula Boulevard took place in the period 2005-2006. This

extensive area, which is the foreground of the historic Tczew Bridge as well as the exposure of panorama of the Old Town, is now a popular venue for public feasts and individual recreation. Riverside character of the space has been strengthened by the construction in 2007-2008 passenger sailing harbour.

The new and renewed spaces are very popular among the residents but also as a weekend destination among visitors from other parts of the region. For now, however, public interest does not translate into increased interest in business entities. Situation may change as the technical condition of buildings improves.



Fig.3. Old factory changed into The Regional Exhibition Centre of Lower Vistula "Arts Factory"



Fig. 4. The Vistula Boulevard exposing the panorama of The Old Town

4.2. Pruszcz Gdański – birth of new town centre

Pruszcz Gdański is an example of a powiat capital located near large agglomeration, where after the introduction of market economy - largely due to competitive property prices - the number of inhabitants have rapidly increased. In the years 1995-2010 it has raised from 21.000 to nearly 27.000 (Local Data Bank 2012).

Twenty years ago the main space of everyday activities was the historical axis of Grunwaldzka Street – nowadays part of the national road No. 1. An addition to that was a perpendicularly located monumental square, formed between administrative buildings from the 50s. The town, which has developed from a village in XIX century, never had a traditional multifunctional main square. With increasing availability of private cars and raising number of residents commuting to Gdansk, the road has become very busy, thoroughfare did not provide favourable conditions for leisure, recreation, or integration. Neither the square in the administrative quarter met the expectations of citizens concerning features and quality of the main public space.

The town authorities decided to seize the opportunity associated with an area left by the army in early 90s, which due to fast development of residential zones has become centrally located. The first step was architectural competition organized in 1996 for the concept of new centre, under which would be drawn up local development plan (Pancewicz 2009). This method of planning made it possible to create a document with a high degree of detail in the arrangements for public space. The development of outdoor spaces was to be carried through the municipality, while the surrounding quarters would be built by private investors. Such concept of development was quite innovative for Polish town planning standards.

Formulating the first development strategy (2001) local authorities have highlighted that the town development would be based on the increase of population but also the provision of appropriate quality of new public spaces. The main stage of the work was completed in 2007 (fig. 5). The existing pedestrian routes are being continuously developed to integrate other parts of town. In the immediate vicinity of the centre a new municipal park is to be completed

(fig. 6). Although the municipality is very active in acquiring the EU funds, both investments were funded from its own budget.

Thanks to this policy Pruszcz Gdański stands out from the new urban structures sprawled around the Gdansk agglomeration. It relates not only to the architectural quality, but also integration of local community around the initiatives for further improvement of the quality of urban space. An example of such project is a social concept of land use of the former sugar factory "Strefa Cukru" (sugar zone) started in 2011. The subject project is an area of 20 hectares with its historical buildings of sugar factory excluded from production in 2004.

This case proves that high quality of public spaces can convert new residents from a group of strangers to active community - integrating them around town aesthetics as a common value.



Fig. 5. New town centre in Pruszcz Gdański



Fig.6. Newly arranged municipal park

4.3. Sopot – cosy resort or metropolis?

Sopot, a town of 35.000 inhabitants is situated between the larger centres - Gdansk and Gdynia. The settlement has a long history, however it has developed in the nineteenth century as a health resort basing on the local curative resources. In the current phase of development merged the three cities into a single organism divided solely in an administrative way. Despite this, Sopot has retained the specifics of holiday resort. In the period 1995-2010 the town has been affected by population loss reaching 14 %. As the only one of presented case studies it has a status of powiat which means that among the responsibilities of the municipality is building control and labour market.

Location of the seaside and in the centre of conurbation meant that even in rough period of so-called real-socialism the town has been one of the most popular holiday destinations and in the low season a place of recreation used by inhabitants of neighbouring cities. However, as the competition of foreign resorts became accessible for Polish citizens, the most popular domestic destinations had to improve their offer.

One of the major spatial problems of the town were poor state of housing from the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century in and provisional fixtures located in the centre, in plots where previous management was destroyed during World War II. The most severe socio-economic problems included a decrease and aging of the population.

The first revitalization program was adopted in 1997. It was one of the earliest documents of this type in Poland. The first step was indicating four quarters for pilot corrective actions. The priorities were renewal of buildings and improvement of housing conditions to stimulate the increase of functional, technical, economic and cultural values of the area. The municipality has provided two forms of support: refunding part of the costs or affordable housing loans to residential communities.

In the following years this method has been introduced in other parts of the town. This way, during 10 years 190 residential buildings were renovated. Activities were concentrated on elimination of substandard facilities and modernization of public space. The attractiveness of the downtown area of Sopot has been improved. New private investments related mostly to the sphere of services, including tourism services (Muzioł-Węclawowicz 2009).

In 2006 the new Local Revitalization Program has been adopted. The new program has expanded the list of areas for urban renewal. Apart from the downtown zone included in the program of 1997, it has indicated the areas associated with recreational heritage – the Forest Opera and the Hippodrome. The objects have been renewed with financial support from the Regional Operational Programme for The Pomorskie Voivodeship 2007-2013, however according to priority axis dedicated to tourism development – not urban renewal.

The flagship investment shaping the public space of the town centre is the Haffner Centre built in the years 2006-2010 - one of the first projects in Poland implemented in the system of public-private partnership. The subject of project was development of the area located near the sea on the main axis leading from the train station on the “Molo” - Europe's longest wooden pier which is an iconic landmark of Sopot. As a result of investment has been built up an area, which since the devastation of World War II was had been arranged temporarily. Also the quality and consistency of walking space was improved, the existing coastal road was hidden in a tunnel.

The taken actions did not manage to stop the decline of population. The property prices are among the highest in the country - comparable only to the capital. This model of policy towards public spaces does not seem to be socially fragile, nevertheless Sopot since XIX century holds an image of an exclusive location. The results of opinion polls show that the residents appreciate the increased attractiveness of the town and living environment, security and cooperation among local society (Chabierska 2008).



Fig. 7. The Haffner Centre
source: www.centrum-hafnera.eu

4.4. Ustka – strategy of choices

Ustka is seaside town with the formal status of health resort. Its population is close to 16.000 but since 1995 it has shrunk over 9%. The availability of higher-order services provides, in a large extent, the proximity of Słupsk (almost 100.000 inhabitants). Before the political transformation the largest employers were state owned shipyards and fish processing companies, but after the introduction of market economy, they have begun to fall. The problem of unemployment has affected mostly the residents of the central part of the town (Jażewicz 2007). This part also faced with numerous problems arising from technical state of infrastructure and historic buildings.

In 1996 a group of experts has completed a document called “Program Strategicznego Ekorozwoju Ustki” (strategic sustainability program for Ustka), which proposed new directions for social and economic development basing on unique endogenous potentials. Important role was ascribed to development of curative tourism. This program was very innovative for Polish culture of governance of that time. Not all of the proposals have been implemented into the local policy, but many of the main postulates are continued in the subsequent programs.

According to the Local Revitalization Program of Ustka (2005) one of the ways to overcome the difficult socio-economic situation should be development of broadly understood tourism. The town has several features that predispose to this function - mainly seaside location and curative minerals as well as related elements of cultural heritage, which constitute the uniqueness of this locality. Important conditioning of development is the vicinity of almost hundred-thousand Słupsk. Progressing between urbanization between those two centres (Rydz, Jażewicz 2005) and the concept of so-called “bi-city”, promoted by local authorities, may increase the influx of people of Słupsk as an attractive place of recreation or residence.

The first actions under the revitalization program took place in 2005 and were related to calming and partial elimination of car traffic from the historical centre, building new boulevard and improving the quality of green spaces. However, to sustain the cosy image offered to tourists - basing on traditions of resort and fishing village – above all it was necessary to preserve in the townscape the characteristic nineteenth-century buildings. Comprehensive regeneration of historic substance has been started in 2006. The entity responsible for the task is Usteckie Towarzystwo Budownictwa Społecznego (municipal society of social housing). The project covers only buildings owned by the municipality - in Polish conditions this usually equals buildings where residents could not afford to buyout their flats. Due to their poor condition, the objects are not repaired but - after the previous inventory and demolition - rebuilt with modern technologies and materials (fig. 9). After this process buildings do not come back into the hands of former residents but are listed in an open tender procedure. The municipality offers to former residents new flats in different location (Bugajewska 2009).

This approach ensures that the municipality will gain means the rescue of other objects, despite having very limited financial capacity. Presented method is controversial because it actually does not contribute to revitalization but gentrification of space, however this way Ustka has managed to keep its position as a top holiday destination in conditions of competition from abroad.

This strategy seems to be stable but incomplete. Next to newly arranged area is located a vast post-industrial zone is waiting to be invested. Tourism - function chosen as principal - seems close to reaching the maximum stage of development. What will be the next strategic choice? One of options is development of residential function (*vide* the case of Pruszcz Gdański), however in current condition of the real estate market It seems rather unlikely.



Fig. 8. Relics of the fisheries heritage



Fig. 9. Rebuilt model of traditional house

4.5. Chojnice – strengthening the sub-regional position

Chojnice is a poviát capital with number of inhabitants close to 40.000. The population is rather stable. The nearest town of similar scale is located 70 km away, while large city is in a distance of nearly 90 km in opposite direction, thus the town is a service base for the residents of an area much wider than the poviát. Due to the nearby Tuchola Forest (UNESCO Biosphere Reserve) also serves as a tourist, but it is not the dominant element of the local economic base. Using the conditions resulting from the location, the town authorities are consistently running the policy aimed at gaining the position of sub-regional centre. In addition to development of services such as health care or higher education, an important part of this policy is to develop of an image of public space, which would be adequate to aspirations of the municipality.

First, the most spectacular transformations took place in the centrally located Old Market Square and the adjacent streets. Within activities, carried out in years 2001 – 2002, the place has been given a new “historicist” character. An important change was also the new functional division of this space - limited access of cars and priority for pedestrians and cyclists. New quality has been also given boundaries of public space - elevations of surrounding buildings. The most substantial change was in the facade of modernist building from the 60s, covering most of the southern frontage of The Old market. Basing on archival material, town architect developed a design mimicking six eclectic facades. This architectural solution - although controversial – has completed the new aesthetics of the square. Other facades were renovated by their owners, however with advisory and financial support of the municipality.

Among provisions of the Development Strategy (2002) was improvement living conditions and strengthening the role of southern sub-centre of the voivodeship, however the document was rather general. The “Chojnice Revitalisation Programme for 2004-2013” has declared further improvement of the quality of public spaces. Within of its realization are consistently implemented, those vestments that contribute to the visibility of cultural values of the town centre - both through the aesthetics of space and enrichment of the functional program. In 2005-2006 a former hospital has been adapted for functions of education, cultural facilities and rehabilitation. Part of the investment was also new pedestrian link towards the Old Market. Next, in 2006-2007 the fourteenth century Basilica Minor has been renovated. As a result of the project was able to restore the splendour of the object which is a characteristic element of the panorama and improve the quality of space located on the back of the Old Market.

Changing the image has brought an increased commercial attractiveness of the area. In most towns of this scale, which contain a historic centre, the problem is lack of attractive program of services - due to the preference of businesses for new investment areas. In the Old Market of Chojnice are located prestigious brands construction new shopping centres does not affect the reduction of interest in premises located in the historic centre.

This case shows that appropriate order of investments allows complementarity of these functions. The town of Chojnice has built the position of sub-regional centre based on local entrepreneurs supported with adequate aesthetics of public spaces and afterwards introduced large shopping centres.



*Fig. 10. Bird view of The Old Market Square. Southern frontage on the left.
source: Municipality of Chojnice*



*Fig. 11. Basilica Minor and a street with new "historicist" character.
source: Municipality of Chojnice*

5. Conclusions

The time elapsed since the beginning of political transformation in Poland allows capturing a certain sequence of spatial policies of medium-sized municipalities. The 90s passed mostly under the sign of catching up backwardness in the field of basic infrastructure and drawing first strategic plans dedicated to new quality of public spaces. The first projects were carried out with municipalities' own resources, but a significant increase in investments in this field resulted from the availability of the UE funds. Great importance for the recognition of the quality of public spaces in local policies had broadly understood culture of strategic programming transferred from the "old" Europe. Probably soon, as the shift from system of grants to revolving funds is expected (The European Commission 2012), it will turn out if improving the quality of public spaces remains indeed an important element of development strategies or just a temporary use the emerging opportunities, which resulted in successful way.

Most of the medium-sized towns run a policy of improving aesthetics and functional values of historic public spaces. This process is oriented on growth / inhibition of decrease in property prices or development of tourism.

Different challenges are facing the group of towns affected by the sudden growth of population. There, forming a town centre, adequate to the needs of growing population is the basic condition to create a distinct identity – become an attractive residential location, distinguished from the amorphous and anonymous suburban area.

In the analysed cases, changes have started with a vision imposed by the municipality. The activities were aimed at creating new image - a measure of territorial marketing - rather than reinforcing the public significance of space. However, this process is bidirectional - aimed at attracting potentials from the outside (investors, customers) as well as strengthening the sense of local identity. New quality of selected public spaces encourages the local community to articulate a need and expected form of changes in other parts of town. So far, those strategies of "slow mode" and "small steps development" were rather successful, however in most of them there is a room for improvements.

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ⁱⁱ The definition of medium-sized town formulated in project of The National Spatial Development Concept (2005): "towns with population comprising between 10,000 and 100,000. To this rather diverse group are included - because of their functions - even the smaller towns, which have become capitals of poviats".

ⁱⁱⁱ Before 1995 different statistical method was applied.