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**HISTORIC SPATIAL LAYOUTS IN SMALL TOWNS  
IN WARMIA AND THEIR ROLE IN THE CURRENT LIFE  
OF INNER TOWN AREAS**

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**Key words:** architecture, urbanism, renovation, revitalization, conservation of historic buildings, historic conservation zone.

**A b s t r a c t**

The historic layouts of streets in small towns of Warmia are mainly found in inner-town areas, which until the present day remain the town centres, giving identity to each town. Because of the complex character of the elements creating these structures, any conversion in a historic town centre should result in good exposure of the old town against the backdrop consisting of the other parts of the town. This approach, however, is possible only when many different issues, such as spatial, economic and social ones, are solved. Finding such complex solutions is a problem shared by most of the towns in Warmia.

**HISTORYCZNE UKŁADY PRZESTRZENNE MAŁYCH MIAST WARMII  
I ICH ROLA WE WSPÓŁCZESNYM FUNKCJONOWANIU OBSZARÓW ŚRÓDMIEJSKICH**

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**Słowa kluczowe:** architektura, urbanistyka, rewaloryzacja, rewitalizacja, konserwacja zabytków, strefa ochrony konserwatorskiej.

**A b s t r a k t**

Historyczne układy przestrzenne małych miast warmińskich dotyczą przede wszystkim przestrzeni śródmiejskich, pozostających do czasów obecnych centrami miast. To również przestrzenie będące przejawem tożsamości ośrodków. Złożoność elementów tworzących te struktury wymaga takich przekształceń, które powodowałyby ekspozycję zespołów staromiejskich na tle pozostałych obszarów miasta. Wymaga to rozwiązywania wielu problemów, nie tylko przestrzennych, lecz także gospodarczych i społecznych, co pozostaje obecnie wspólnym zadaniem dla większości miast regionu.

## **Introduction**

Most towns in Warmia are small and have the original street layout similar in size. For centuries, these town centres have remained unchanged or undergone very small alterations. Most of the urban population in Warmia live in such small municipalities. However, the inner-town areas in many local towns have been badly degraded by the operations that took place in the last months of World War Two and by the post-war reconstruction efforts. Most of these inner-town areas today call for renovation. It is obvious that any remodeling should reach beyond the material component of the spatial arrangement so as to improve the living conditions of the local residents and aid the economic growth. Above all, a town is where people live.

The present state of preservation of the historic centres in the towns of Warmia – their old town areas – is quite varied. The major damage to these towns was inflicted by the Soviet Army, which demolished historic buildings on a mass scale. The spatial degradation of the towns continued after the war, when the town centres were rebuilt, often with little consideration given to the scale and character of the historic inner-town areas. In many towns, the results of this approach can be seen until today as their old towns have been nearly completely destroyed. In such towns as Biskupiec, Bisztynek, Dobre Miasto, Lidzbark Warmiński, Pieniężno, the destruction of the original layout is most clearly visible in the nearest proximity to the old town market.

The present-day view of the inner-town areas is additionally affected by the bad economic situation in the region (unemployment, migration to larger towns). This alone is an argument strong enough to prove that any renovation of the urban space should be accompanied by a search for economic and social grounds for future development. The tourism industry, whose potential economic power seems insufficiently developed (in view of the shortage of natural resources in the region), could be a possible solution. It would, however, require redesigning the revitalization programmes, which – when implemented – should pertain not only to the form of a given town but also its functions. Additionally, revitalization of the old towns in Warmia would help to preserve their historic identity and the cultural heritage of the whole region.

## **Spatial conditions in the towns**

There are twelve towns founded in the Middle Ages in the historic region of Warmia. The specific nature of these medieval towns was shaped by the military considerations – all the towns were located at a distance of 15–30 km and had a fortified castle or a stronghold, as dictated by the policy of the

Teutonic Order towards the conquered lands of the Old Prussian tribes. This approach created a firm basis on which the towns in the whole region were founded (KAJZER 1993).

Except for Olsztyn, all the other towns in Warmia can be classified as small ones. Two of them, namely Braniewo and Frombork, have developed under different conditions, a question which could become a subject for a separate study. The remaining towns are Barczewo, Biskupiec Reszelski, Bisztynek, Dobre Miasto, Jeziorany, Lidzbark Warmiński, Orneta, Pieniężno and Reszel.

The historic layouts of the towns, in most cases, have been preserved until the present day. They consist of a regular grid of streets, which divide the town centre into square blocks and a market square in the middle. Some deviations from this regular street plan further away from the main square were due the existing watercourses and other topographic features of the terrain (CZUBIEL, DOMAGAŁA 1969).

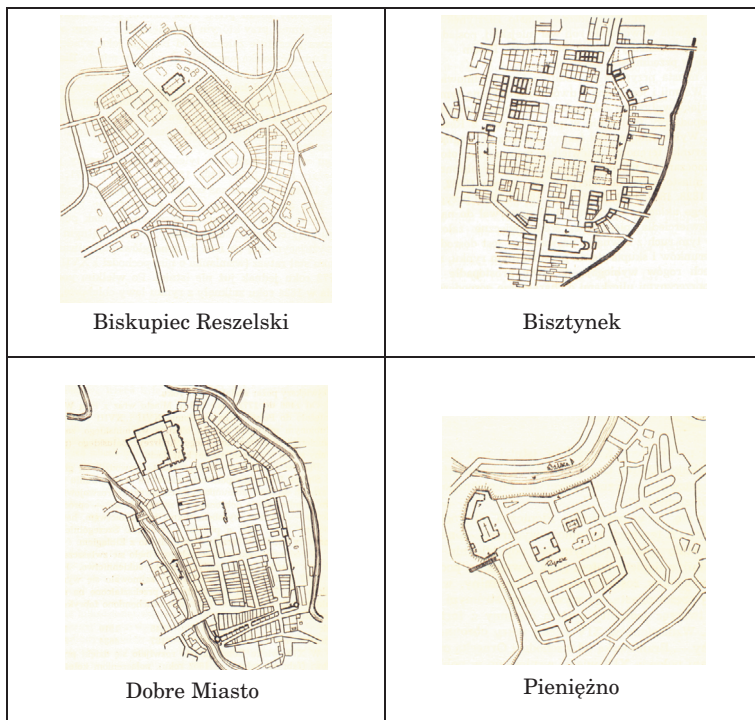


Fig. 1. Street plans of towns in Warmia in the 1950s

Source: CZUBIEL L., DOMAGAŁA T. (1969)

Among the nine towns listed above, there are the ones where certain building projects completed in the 1960s and 1970s introduced a new identity, and let us add – a weird one, to the town centres. Spatial structures of the

market squares in Dobre Miasto or Biskupiec Reszelski were filled in with roundabouts, thus becoming the main transportation hubs. Accumulating most of the road traffic in the town centre (e.g. the transit traffic passing through Dobre Miasto to the Polish-Russian border checkpoint in Bezledy) disturbs its small-town character of the main municipal square.



Fig. 2. Dobre Miasto – a roundabout in the middle of the historic market square  
Photo: M. Zagroba



Fig. 3. Biskupiec Reszelski – a roundabout in the middle of the historic market square  
Photo: M. Zagroba

Consequently, any action undertaken to renovate the spatial layout of any small town in Warmia should include the concept of restoring the central function of the inner-town area and building proper links with the other parts of a town. What we deal with here are small town communities, where the



bonds with one's place of residence are formed mainly by feeling attached to the inner-town area. Solutions which neglect these relationships can lead to a situation which has already appeared in some towns, for example in Pieniężno, such as depopulation of the town centre. By locating some attractive urban functions near the bus terminal in Pieniężno, e.g. services, shops, the centre of the town was shifted there away from the old town.

The buildings which today stand in the historic centres of the towns in Warmia are quite varied. Orneta and Reszel seem to be outstanding in this respect. Their spatial layouts are among the best preserved in Warmia. The urban structure as well as the architecture of these two towns are well grounded in their historic context. In both towns, the centre is dominated by a clearly visible regular pattern of the streets as well as a wealth of forms kept in a similar style including the scale, divisions, rhythms, architectural detail and light colours of walls. The accumulation of residential houses with services and trade facilities located on the ground floors defines the inner-town area as a true town centre. This in turn affects the way the town centre functions economically and socially.

The post-war reconstruction of the buildings in the historic town centres had a tragic effect on some of the towns in Warmia. Examples can be seen among the buildings raised around the market squares of Dobre Miasto, Bisztynek, Lidzbark Warmiński or Pieniężno. Buildings in an architectural style foreign to towns in Warmia or even worse – the ones lacking any style at all – do not correspond to the historically grounded patterns. The town centres lack compact complexes of small buildings, with fine lines of division, well fitted in the historical content of each town. In fact, spatial deformation has occurred over large areas of the old towns. Most of these post-war buildings were raised using means of architectural expression typical of the socialism era, thus bringing havoc to the structure which has been defined in the past centuries.

The expression of the spatial aspect of the renovation of inner-town areas should first of all serve as a means of restoring their physical image. This stage, however, contains encoded economic and social conditions, associated with the functions performed by a town. The mutual relations between these aspects are a basis for determination of the directions and ways of renovating the towns.

The spatial structure of old historic town centres to some extent defines the way other urban areas should be managed. This relationship in the analyzed small towns in Warmia is again diverse. Nonetheless, in most cases there is certain hierarchy which orders the scale and intensity of developed areas depending on the town centre. Such cohesion is particularly strongly felt in the smallest towns of Warmia, where the urban development has not been intensive.



Fig. 4. Lidzbark Warmiński – houses along the northern side of the market square  
Photo: M. Zagroba



Fig. 5. Pieniężno – buildings along the eastern side of the market square – the spire of a Lutheran church and a residential house  
Photo: M. Zagroba



Fig. 6. Jeziorany – fragment of a developed area in the town

Photo: M. Zagroba

The state of preservation of the spatial components in towns is largely dependent on the economic and social situation of municipalities. Statistical data such as the unemployment rate, population growth or housing stock enable us to illustrate the economic and social potential of towns, which is essential for any renovation of urban space. Based on the analysis completed by the author of this paper (statistical yearbooks) it can be concluded that the potential of the smallest towns in Warmia is weak. The situation on the labour market as well as the small population growth are particularly threatening. In the nearest future, they can lead to increased migration of the population to larger towns, depopulation of the small towns and, consequently, deteriorated management of the urban space.

## Conclusions

Renovation of degraded inner-town areas in small towns is a great chance for restoring their capacity to function as historic centres of urban localities. Renovation should involve spatial issues, improvement of the quality of life for local communities and creation of opportunities for economic growth. Designing and implementing renovation programmes is a complex process planned for many years and therefore requires integrated actions undertaken by teams of people. The complex nature of town renovation means that the issue should be approached in an interdisciplinary fashion both at the preparation and implementation stages. Because the economic and social situation of the towns in Warmia is difficult, it is crucial to search for financial means and co-

financing of revitalization projects from private, municipal and external sources, e.g. structural funds, which at present offer most opportunities to co-finance revitalization programmes (SKALSKI 2002).

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